Waiting for Liz
ANGELA C. KELLY

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By Angela C. Kelly

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Dedication

For you.
For me.
For us—at least the good parts.

* * * *

Acknowledgements

This book would not have been remotely possible without the understanding of my wife, the endurance of my editor, and the patience and support of those I hold closest in the fire of my beating heart.

* * * *

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By Angela C. Kelly

Foreword

We should write a book.

In retrospect, I know it probably wasn't you who said it. It had to have been me. Of course, I would have wanted it to have been you because it would've been so unexpectedly romantic.

"About what?" you (probably) asked.

"About us. Our story. You know, I write a chapter, you write a chapter—from our own perspectives."

"I'm not sure you'd like my perspective." You smiled. I wasn't entirely sure you were joking. You kissed me. (Or maybe you didn't.) After a moment you said, "No one would believe it."

Do you remember? I do. Still. You have gone, so I am left to write it myself. You probably knew that I would someday.

You have vanished now, leaving only the ghost of our long and complicated relationship. We haven't spoken in over a decade. I have no idea where you are. I thought I knew some years ago but then heard a conflicting report from an old acquaintance. It doesn't matter now, of course. Not really.

I am still haunted. I wonder about you, whether you are happy, satisfied, fulfilled. I want those things for you; I always have. But mostly I wonder if you are haunted too. Do you hear my name sometimes? Do you see someone who looks like me but couldn't possibly be me in that particular place at that particular time? Do you hear an old song on the radio and recall a pleasant memory…or an awful one? These things still happen to me.

My life looks very different now. In so many ways, good ways, it remains the same. Did you know that I bought a house, got a master's degree, published two novels, got married? I wanted to tell you these things and more when they actually happened, but we were so…finished. Lately, I have come to realize that maybe there really is a forever in that last goodbye.

This was the only thing left for me to do.

Part 1

First of all, love is a joint experience between two persons—but the fact that it is a joint experience does not mean that it is a similar experience to the two people involved.
—Carson McCullers

Chapter 1

"This is my lesbian friend, Angela."

That's how she was introduced to Elizabeth by her sort-of friend Jack. Jack was that kind of person: he would introduce you by stating your name and then inserting some sort of qualifier, trying to be politically correct but accomplishing quite the opposite. Angela considered Jack a sort-of friend because she only sort-of liked him. Most of the time she found him irritating, self-absorbed, and inappropriate. Still, they worked together and drank together, and he always recommended good movies.

The exterior view of Angela's life at twenty-nine was enviable. Having achieved much of what she set out to do in her early twenties, she found herself in a comfortable home with an adoring partner, a host of friends, minimal debt, a recently acquired degree, and a job that used it. In the view of certain types of people, she had *arrived* and was doing quite well. Yet to assume such things was to know Angela not at all. If anyone had bothered to penetrate the dark space that set off her smile, they would have discovered the ferocious little secrets and microcosm of brewing catastrophes. In truth, Angela was unhappy in the worst way to be unhappy—she didn't even realize she was.

Around the time that Angela was introduced to Elizabeth, her relationship with her "adoring partner," Dawn, had already begun to disintegrate. This trouble was of the same nature as her own soul and psychic trouble, made worse by the lack of acknowledgment that the trouble even existed. Two emotionally wounded people do not magically heal when they join, nor do they heal each other. Two alcoholics do not make a sober union. These facts are especially true when neither party recognizes

themselves as such. For Angela, coping by ignoring was standard in her family of origin—if there was a problem, they were certainly not going to talk about it. Ever. Better to just pretend that things were fine until they were, even if they never were.

Angela and Dawn had recently introduced new substances into their relationship. Marijuana was a sporadic indulgence and had been since they met. Angela had never tried cocaine, and Dawn had, so they made plans to do some together. The couple sometimes hung out with Dawn's friend Mary and her husband, Ed, whose drug use and alcohol consumption was manageable, at least to Angela. In a group of people who indulge together, there is a euphoric contentment that warmly envelops those who are partaking. In oblivion, they believe there is no fear, no sadness, no loneliness. So Angela and Dawn snorted cocaine with Mary and Ed.

Their evening out began in one bar, migrated to several others, and ended back in the apartment. Angela spent a great deal of time observing the rest of her party, once she'd ingested the cocaine, to see how they behaved so she would know how to behave. She noticed that she could drink as much Jack Daniels as she wanted and not feel sick. She noted that her friends were a little extra *friendly*, that is to say, affectionate with one another and with her. The neon lights in the bars seemed brighter, people—known and unknown—touching her felt more electric. The songs she chose on the jukeboxes sounded better, even though she owned much of the same music and had the CDs at home. Angela liked this drug and wanted more of it.

Not long after that night, Angela was getting to know Carol, a relatively new coworker who other coworkers sometimes mocked behind her back because she was socially awkward. Angela was completely uninterested in Carol as a person or coworker or potential friend at first. But one day she overheard something new about Carol: "she has a really nice house, and she is very generous with her drugs." And now Angela was very interested in pursuing a friendship with Carol. Eventually an invitation was issued.

Angela was nervous. She couldn't immediately recall ever

buying drugs in her life. There was that time she'd bought weed in Tompkins Square Park in New York City. But that was high school. In her adult life, she had always left it to others to do the buying, no matter the substance involved. But for Carol's house, Angela was prepared. She had cash to buy a little weed, and she planned to inquire about some cocaine. She had not stopped thinking about *that* since the night with Dawn and Mary and Ed and Jack Daniels and the jukebox at the bar. Just the possibility of making the purchase was terrifying—and exhilarating. Angela had imagined *several* possible scenarios: In one fantasy, Carol said, "Of course I have cocaine, but I will give it to you for free. Let's do some right now!" In another, "That shit'll kill you! Don't you know that? And I'm offended you think I'm the kind of person who would do cocaine." In still another, Carol was a cop—even though she'd smoked weed with Angela minutes before. None of those things happened. When Angela carefully brought up the cocaine, Carol—who would become a trusted friend, confidante, enabler, and, finally, an enemy—said, "Fuck that shit. I've got something better."

Angela did not try the "something better" at Carol's house right then. When she got home that day, Dawn was at work. Alone, Angela tried to balance her fears with her excitement, which was so tremendous she thought perhaps she would be crushed beneath the weight of it. She had asked Carol what this substance was.

"Crank," Carol had said.

Angela had no idea what crank was, although she had heard of it—or read about it, she couldn't be sure. She had asked what was in it, but Carol had intimated that if Angela knew that she wouldn't want it. For someone else, that might have been perceived as something to perhaps consider before proceeding. It might've even convinced said person that trying crank was a terrible idea, something to be avoided. But for Angela, an addict who didn't know she was one, such a statement made it all the more alluring. She thought, "I'll just try a tiny bit. I know how to snort things; I've done that already." Carefully, she dumped a tiny bit of the white powder onto a

compact mirror. It *looked* like cocaine; how different could it be? She chopped it up with a credit card and pushed it around the mirror into a thin line, as she had seen Mary do in the bathroom stall at the bar, with the cocaine. Then she fished a dollar bill out of her wallet and rolled it up, also as Mary had done, not to mention countless actors in movies. Finally, she snorted it.

Immediately, her face became hot and tingly and, for a moment, she panicked. But the flush passed. She went out to the kitchen and started doing the dishes that were in the sink. For a while, she thought, “I don’t feel anything.” And then she did. She realized she was doing the dishes with vigor, that it felt wonderful to have her hands in the soapy water. She recalled that Carol had said this drug had a significant *body buzz*, and Angela had not known what that meant. Once the crank had really settled into her bloodstream however, she knew exactly what a body buzz was. She would’ve described it as something that had to be experienced in order to really understand how it felt, like sex or skydiving or being underwater. By the time Dawn came home from work, Angela had masturbated to orgasm three times, organized their CD collection alphabetically, rearranged the kitchen cabinets, and was vacuuming the floorboards with all the living room furniture pulled away from the walls. When Dawn walked in, she just blinked, smiled, and then asked, “*What* did she give you?”

Within a month, Angela and Dawn (although usually just Angela) were making regular visits to Carol’s house to purchase small baggies of crank. The couple did not engage with this drug every day at first, but they did every weekend. A small crevice opened in their relationship as the use of crank became a regular thing between them, the result of individual preference: although Dawn enjoyed this new thing that they had discovered, she still preferred alcohol. Angela, on the other hand, practically stopped drinking altogether. That sort of buzz no longer interested her. Only crank brought her the kind of high she craved. She felt more productive than she ever had before. She was better at things than she was without the drug, both at work (for they did eventually start using during the week) and at play. *Focused. Driven. Purposeful.* These were ways that Angela thought she

should be—these characteristics gave her great value in the world, and she knew that crank was the reason she could be those things. These feelings, these qualities became not merely valuable to her, but essential. And so the cracks widened and spread in an intricate web deep within Angela's relationship with Dawn. As the veins of decay spread, deadly gases were leaking into the ground beneath them. It would only require a spark to ignite the explosion.

* * * *

It was under these circumstances—increased drug use, unacknowledged problems of a five-year relationship, Angela's own untethered soul—that she was introduced to Elizabeth. Jack was showing Elizabeth around work on her first day, not so much for her comfort or her benefit but to satisfy his own ego, trotting her around and showing off his trophy. That was all. Initially Angela hadn't paid any attention. Elizabeth was a kid—eighteen, maybe nineteen—and she was in a romantic relationship with Jack, who had made sure to get her hired where he worked. In fact, Angela didn't really think very much about Elizabeth or even notice her much. Until she did. One day at work, Angela realized she was feeling unusually off balance, almost anxious. She felt flushed and hot. There was a scent on the air that reminded her of…something. It got stronger right then. Angela noticed that Liz had just walked by, and now she was even more flushed.

As the weeks passed, Angela began to notice this would happen even when Elizabeth was just alluded to in conversation. She also noticed that she had a running catalog of all of Liz's outfits and would make mental notes when she repeated something especially attractive or noteworthy. She sometimes went over and over her mental images of Elizabeth in these outfits when she was feeling particularly daydreamy. New words popped up in Angela's vocabulary, and she realized it was due to overhearing Liz using them or reading them in one of Elizabeth's work-related messages. Then Angela noticed that Elizabeth had apparently noticed *her* a great deal too.

Jack was involved in several local theater productions, and one weekend he invited Angela and Dawn to attend. He was starring in this one, and Elizabeth was directing. Although the play itself was good and Jack's performance was good, what Angela primarily focused on that night was Elizabeth, who was sitting in the left aisle seat of the third row wearing a short blue summer dress, her hair falling around her shoulders. After the play, Elizabeth and Jack invited Angela and Dawn to dinner along with several other friends and family members of the cast and crew. There were about twenty people at dinner around a big table in a very loud restaurant. Angela could tell that Dawn, meeting Elizabeth for the first time, found her attractive because of the way Dawn looked at her and flirted with her.

Dawn *always* flirted with pretty girls. Angela thought Dawn embarrassed herself when she did this but never said so, especially because sometimes these pretty girls responded to Dawn's flirting. Angela presumed they liked the attention of a much older woman. Angela herself had been flattered in the beginning, as Dawn was nine years older (making her *nineteen* years older than Elizabeth). But none of that mattered because Angela knew that Elizabeth was flirting with a lot of people, not just the three of them in her direct orbit. She was a coquette by nature. As a pretty girl, she was an expert at negotiating the attention of others. Of course, Angela knew, all pretty girls were.

She tried to pretend that she was not impressed with Elizabeth, her charm, her wit, her intelligence. But Angela had never been very good at hiding her feelings about much of anything, especially people. Several times during that dinner, the two women made eye contact, and those moments felt to Angela like they were lasting a little longer than they should have. Perhaps the others wouldn't notice the slight change in Elizabeth's voice, the almost imperceptible coy head tilt, fingers running through her hair almost compulsively. But they likely *would* notice that Angela abandoned her plate of food, that she had filtered out all the conversations happening around her to focus on just the one, that the presence of her partner barely registered for her, that her face was flushed almost the entire

evening. Angela felt exposed, but Elizabeth didn't seem bothered at all by the danger in the glances, the sly smiles. Eventually, all the food was eaten and all the wine drunk—some, in fact, by Angela, because Elizabeth made her feel nervous, and Angela needed everything possible to cope with that. When everyone was saying their goodbyes and goodnights, Elizabeth clasped Angela's hands within hers and said, "Thank you so much for coming." And that night, in that moment, a lightning bolt struck Angela's core and ignited it. Still, for a while, she did not acknowledge to herself that it had happened. She was with Dawn. Elizabeth was with Jack.

* * * *

When Jack had shown off Elizabeth to his friends, they had only been dating for a short while, a few months maybe. But Angela would soon discover they had a rollercoaster relationship that had begun very passionately and quickly deteriorated into a bit of a circus. The next thing Angela heard around the office was that some sort of threatening phone call had been made and recorded and brought to the police. Elizabeth got a restraining order against Jack, which rather complicated their work situation. In the end, he quit. Elizabeth stayed. Angela thought it was interesting that her employers and coworkers actually seemed to side with and favor Elizabeth. She had only been there a few weeks at that point, while Jack had worked there for a few years. Apparently, Angela was not the only person that only sort-of liked him.

Angela and Elizabeth started to interact more, talking more and emailing one another from across the office. The barrier between them was gone now. Angela started calling her Liz rather than Elizabeth when she addressed her aloud. In her thoughts, she still called her Elizabeth always, though: it seemed somehow more romantic. Jack had always spoken of her as Elizabeth in her absence also but called her Liz to her face. She suspected he did this for the same reasons—*romanticism*, *idealization*. But, yes, now, always when speaking her actual name to her actual face, she was Liz.

* * * *

“Honey?”

“Yeah.”

“You know how we always joke about having a hot young plaything to share?”

Angela and Dawn *had* joked about that. Frequently. Except they both knew that they were really only half joking. At least, Angela had been only half joking when it had come up over the past year or so. Or maybe it had been the last two years. Or maybe it had been always, she couldn’t be sure. Maybe Dawn had only ever been teasing, never expecting Angela to actually pursue such a thing.

“Yeah?”

“Well, I think I may have a candidate for that. Do you remember that girl that broke up with Jack, the one I work with?”

“Do you really think she’d go for it?”

“I don’t know yet. I’m working on it.”

They did not speak about it again for several weeks.

* * * *

Angela had met Dawn in a bar just a few months before she had been scheduled to relocate to another state. She had decided at twenty-four to pursue her education since she had not done so right after community college. She still moved, but the fervor of a new relationship made the move more difficult—and also more dramatic, which Angela had liked for reasons she didn’t understand—and the only thing that had made it bearable was knowing that Dawn would eventually follow her. The longer she lived without Dawn, the more she knew she’d be fine on her own. But she also knew that she needed to be with Dawn because she needed a hero, and she also needed someone who was also willing to martyr themselves for her. She needed to be a sort of kept woman because that is how she could feel safe in the world.

After being separated for five months, she and Dawn met

in Florida for a vacation. The first night they were there, Dawn dropped to her knees on the beach and gave Angela a ring. She said, “My whole life, all I ever wanted was someone to love.” And Angela responded by saying, “My whole life, all I ever wanted was someone to love me.” This was a lie, of course. She wanted much more. Dawn had told Angela that the ring was not a real diamond but a simulated diamond. This was fine because Angela knew somewhere deep within that theirs was only a simulated relationship. She knew that she had settled for something, though it had been a conscious decision to do so. That is not to say that she did not love Dawn—she did. As Angela understood things, there were many varieties of love, and this love she knew to mean that she cared about Dawn, that her happiness mattered to Angela, that she had a sort of respect for Dawn’s ability to take care of things. She also accepted that her love for Dawn was not the same as Dawn’s love for her. Angela also acknowledged that she did not love Dawn the way she had loved other women. She was fine with that because the way she had loved other women had not yielded any rewards, and somewhere inside she acknowledged that all the past loves had been unhealthy, obsessive, even addictive. So Angela believed—or at least tried to convince herself that she believed—that it was her lack of burning passion for Dawn that would hold the relationship together, that what they had created was what mature adult love looked like. She surrendered to the belief that romance, infatuation, falling head over heels, being crazy in love, all were fantasies of youth and could not be counted on to sustain any kind of long-term commitment.

But then…Elizabeth.

Chapter 2

When Angela got the mail on her way in, she saw a postcard from France. Elizabeth had written to her, as promised. For a few moments Angela was taken aback, and she realized that she had not quite believed—didn't dare to believe—that Elizabeth would actually stay in touch. Very soon after their communication at work had become a habit (an *innocent* habit) that could be relied upon, and Angela had begun to analyze, interpret, fantasize, and scheme, Liz removed herself. Several months in the planning, she was going to Europe with a friend for an entire month. As with the old adage about absence and the heart, Angela's obsession took hold with a vengeance. Despite Liz's young age. Despite Angela's status as committed. And very much despite the fact that Angela was in the midst of all this heated and complex preoccupation while nothing had even happened between them, at least nothing apparent. There had been flirting, subtle cues, lingering looks. In some measure Angela believed these things were happening, but another part of her felt like she was losing her mind, that she could not trust her own judgment. But here was proof, this postcard with its short note—*Something happened last night that reminded me of you*. Quite plainly, Elizabeth was thinking about Angela, entertaining ideas about her, even while traipsing across Europe.

Much later, she would confess to Angela that on this European adventure, she had slept with her friend and travelling companion, Lindsey, her first real time with another woman, but not her last.

For the rest of the time that Elizabeth was away, all Angela did, all day and every day, was think about her. She thought about what it would be like to touch her, *really* touch her, for of course there had been the careless brushing of hands, gentle pats on the back from time to time, a playful smack in response to a teasing comment, all flirtatious touching, all holding promise. She carefully imagined kissing her, but only for a few seconds because any more quickly became overwhelming. Never before had Angela experienced such desire, such *craving*

for another person. Often in those weeks while Elizabeth was on a whole other continent, Angela thought that she could feel her, like a cosmic alert, brief flashes when she had thought about her too. To make her absence more bearable, Angela focused on crafting the perfect mixed CD to give Elizabeth upon her return. Naturally, this project became the outlet for the obsession. The songs had to be *right*, had to be in the correct order to maintain a certain *flow*, and, most importantly, had to convey a certain *idea*. The first song essentially acknowledged the attraction, and the last song was clearly an invitation to a threesome. That threesome was the only idea that Angela had, the only logical conclusion to this pursuit. It was inconceivable that she would or could leave Dawn. There was security there—financial, material, yes, even emotional. Bringing Elizabeth *into* her partnership rather than Angela exiting it was the only possible path forward. And Angela knew beyond doubt that Dawn would allow this, because Dawn, after all, was the hero and the martyr.

On Elizabeth's first day back in the office, Angela could just barely restrain herself. Elizabeth had cut her hair much shorter (though it still nearly touched her shoulders), she was wearing a sundress, she was very tan. To observers in the office, Angela was certain it looked for just a moment like they might embrace upon seeing each other, then both parties thought better of it. It was as if there was a visible rainbow spectrum of light undulating between their bodies, accompanied by a quiet crackle of electrical current. She imagined that if the two of them walked side by side through the office all of their coworkers would be swept up in their wake. The hours passed very slowly that day, a trickle of time, even with a steady set of visits to the restroom with Carol. Normally those amphetamines would make the day whiz by in Day-Glo colors underscored with a low hum. Even going outside to smoke every hour did not speed things along. It was agonizing for Angela, but she felt a bit of pleasure mixed into that anguish, or the anguish itself was pleasurable—there is a certain amount of distorted comfort in familiar pain, after all. Before the day was over, Angela gave Liz the CD she had titled *Rhetoric Intermezzo*. "These are just songs I thought

you would like," she lied as she handed it over. Liz looked at Angela in a way that completely disarmed her. "Okay, it might be a little cryptic. Or not. Try not to get the wrong idea."

The next day Elizabeth emailed Angela from across the room. She revealed a great many things or she said very little, depending on who was reading. The sentences that struck Angela the most were:

There's really only one idea to get from this. What I can't figure out is whether that idea is The Wrong Idea you so feared I would get or The Right Idea.

I'd like to know you better than I do, and I think you feel the same way.

Can we just get together and talk honestly?

And her postscript*, I really like the wraparound on the first and last tracks. (Did you really think that by not giving me a track listing…whatever. I have my obsessive behaviors, you have yours.)*

It was unsettling to Angela that she had used the word *obsessive*, for she did not want Elizabeth to know certain things about her. She didn't want her to know anything about the workings of her internal landscape, for one. But the rest of the message—that she had now read approximately one hundred times—seemed positive, even encouraging. Before Angela could contemplate it too much or too long, she went to the breakroom phone to call Dawn. "I'll be home late. I'm giving Liz a ride home."

When five P.M. finally came around like lava, slowly and on fire, Angela and Elizabeth practically ran to Angela's car. They tried to fill the space between them with small talk until Angela asked, "Do you want to go take a walk?" She knew that she could not possibly just drive Elizabeth home and then watch her get out of the car and walk to her door; that was unfathomable. Something had to happen, and it had to happen then. So they drove to a park.

As they talked and walked along a well-worn path, Angela could not help but notice that there were very few other people; no parents with kids or folks walking their dogs or couples taking a romantic stroll hand in hand. She thought that just maybe some forces in the universe had come to conspire alongside her;

it had been a very long time since Angela had wanted anything so singularly, and here she was. The drugs had worn off and been replaced by a feeling that Angela recognized at once, a feeling she had in relationships prior to Dawn, now amplified and a thousand times more intense. Angela knew that tangible sensuality, that elusive high of all highs, ultimately led to her downfall. But it was so intoxicating, as gravitational as the moon on the ocean tides, and she couldn't help herself. So she made her confession and laid out her proposal as matter-of-factly and as distanced from actual emotion as she could. Liz appeared to absorb these things that Angela poured out of herself in stride. Later, Angela would learn that Elizabeth was on her own self-destructive and punishing ride during this time. Being presented with a twisted sexual encounter/relationship proposal with a lesbian and her partner was simply going to be checked off on the list of "Fuck it, why not?" But now? Now it was heaven.

The next day, Angela could not work at all, and she could not fathom how Elizabeth could. But from a distance she seemed to be doing just that. Perhaps she was just pretending, as Angela was: pretending to read email and do research and write production paths and rearrange various papers around on her desk. She was certain everyone in the building knew something was happening between her and Elizabeth. How could they not see what was written all over her face, read her body language every time Elizabeth so much as walked by her desk? She could not escape the feeling that what was about to happen was going to happen very quickly, perhaps as quickly as that evening. And why shouldn't it? It was Friday after all. Weekends, in Angela's opinion, were built for the illicit.

In the middle of the afternoon, Elizabeth's task was to help Angela with a project that had missed a deadline. This wasn't unusual: she was the production assistant, after all. But that day—the day that would become night and become morning the next day and the day after that—it was providential.

As distracted as she may have been, Angela did have a good work ethic. It was one of her more admirable qualities. So despite the concentrated level of anticipation, she and Elizabeth

worked diligently through the afternoon. As they worked side-by-side, Angela couldn't help noting all the "accidental" touching, the caressing of hands and arms and backsides when no one was looking.

Elizabeth startled Angela, whispering, "My God, Angela, it's so intense." Angela wondered *which* thing was so intense—the desire? The thirst? The yearning? The raw *need*? For it was a need, something requisite, something that was *inevitable*. In the weight of that moment, that second or two when the last sibilance of the whispered word was still reverberating in Angela's blood, time stopped. At least it did for Angela. Did it happen that way for Elizabeth? Could it? Angela couldn't know for sure, but she was relatively certain it had been the same. After they stood blinking at each other for a short while, they returned to the task at hand. When it was complete, neither of them would be able to say if what they were working on was done correctly. It only mattered that it was done. They could box up their package and leave work for the day, for the weekend. What they really left was life as they had known it for the month, for the year, for all the time that had come before. The inception of their relationship, the story of them, was at hand.

* * * *

Angela had had girlfriends prior to Dawn, though she had never lived with one, and she had never been with one for so long. When she was twenty, she'd been very much in love and had planned to move in with a girl named Emily, who, at the time, was the most beautiful partner Angela had ever had or believed she ever would have. In the profoundness of being a twenty-year-old in love, she imagined that Emily would be her partner forever. She couldn't possibly love anyone else. On reflection, Angela thought it possible that that was the first time she had really been in love rather than just infatuated or obsessed or chasing after an ideal that she had created in her mind rather than an actual person. There had been many of those, too many. Both before and after Emily that pattern would

repeat itself throughout Angela's life until, one day, many things would happen and many things would become known, and only then would Angela become willing to create new habits. For willingness is the only requirement for real change to occur in a person. All of that was a long way away, though, when Angela was with Emily. They were still a long way away when Angela met Elizabeth.

Before Emily, there had really only ever been one other serious girlfriend, but how serious can things possibly be between teenagers? For Angela, when she was sixteen, it was very serious, deadly serious. Maybe that was only because it was the start of her coming to terms with her own sexuality. She did not fully embrace it until she was twenty-one (just in time for lesbian- and gay-bar drinking). From sixteen to nineteen, her only romantic experience was with her first girlfriend, her first female sexual experience, Joanne. Jo. Angela could never really say if that had been love—what did she know about love at the time? What does anyone really know about love and its many permutations at that age, in youth? In those early years of emotional development, Angela believed wholly that she loved Jo. Jo, as it turned out, was unfaithful.

On the morning that Angela and Emily were supposed to move in together, there had been an issue with a housing inspection. That delayed the move just long enough for it to be revealed to Angela that Emily, like her predecessor, had been unfaithful. Angela was not with anyone for a long time after that.

So Angela had been exposed to treachery, dishonesty, and manipulation in her romantic life from the start, and knew that these were intrinsic to experiencing love. Some were worse than others—Emily hurt more than Jo, for example. With this foundation, it is little wonder that Angela chose Dawn. She chose someone who was devoted to her rather than the other way around. That was without question a much safer passage through relationships, through what she thought of as love. With Dawn she felt safe—at least, she had felt safe for a time. Angela decided sometime between Chrissy—a straight but misguided woman who was at least kind to her—and Dawn that trust was

not what mattered, security was. Stability was. Angela thought these things were a kind of trust; she trusted that she would have a home, that she would be provided for, that she would not be physically abused.

As Angela's beliefs about love and relationships evolved with each experience, she began to understand that each woman evoked different emotions: some were often similar, but none were ever truly the same. How could they be, after all, if the emotions related to different souls and different personalities and different behaviors? It only made sense to Angela that the emotions themselves were as distinct as fractal dimensions in nature. She was disappointed in words when she tried to describe such things, dismayed that such a wide range of sensations had so few descriptors. She told Dawn she loved her but knew that meant something entirely different from when Dawn said it to her. On the day that Angela brought Elizabeth to her apartment, as they stood in the threshold for the space of a heartbeat, she thought to herself, *I will not just need new words. I will need an entirely new language.*

Chapter 3

After a sixty-second tour of the four rooms and hallway, Angela sat Elizabeth down on the couch with a glass of wine and called Dawn from the kitchen phone to inquire what time she would be coming home and informed her they would be having company.

"Is it that girl?"

"Yes."

"So she's coming over?"

"Um…"

"Is she there now?"

"Yes."

"Excellent. I just scored a bag of mushrooms from one of the kids on the wait staff."

"Perfect timing."

"Yeah. Okay, cool. I should be home around seven." It was 5:30 just then.

Once she hung up the phone, Angela looked at Elizabeth rather sheepishly, noting that the vision of Elizabeth just sitting there on the couch drinking a glass of merlot seemed natural, exactly right. She seemed to just belong there, right in that spot on that couch with that glass in the apartment that Angela shared with her partner.

"Do you have plans?"

"I get the feeling I do now." Elizabeth smiled what can only be described as a wicked little smile that frightened Angela just a little. They sat on the couch together, drinking wine and talking, something that had become easier for them over the past weeks and months. Now, as they talked, Angela kept edging closer and she brushed Elizabeth's hair back from her shoulders as they spoke. She lightly caressed her arm and shoulder, too. Elizabeth did not shrink away. Of course she didn't, she had willingly placed herself in this place at this time on this couch in this apartment—the path had been leading here from the moment they met.

At 6:40, Angela could not hold back any longer. She knew that the first time she kissed Elizabeth it had to be without Dawn.

It had to be an occasion that belonged only to them, a moment that they could each return to in their mind's eye whenever they desired.

"Do you trust me?"

"Yes."

"Close your eyes."

"No."

There was no plan B, so she kissed Elizabeth anyway. She felt their whole future in that kiss, and she knew instantly that what they were about to do would bring both incredible joy and bone-crushing despair. She did not know if Elizabeth also had this flash of premonition, or whether she would have said anything if she had. Angela's body and soul, even her brain, were on fire for Elizabeth, for every bit of her. If Angela could have found words just then, she might have said that she wanted to drain Elizabeth dry, as a vampire might, to extract all emotion from her, all of her being, to possess her, to consume her, yes. But Angela also wanted to be consumed by her, to emblazon herself onto her heart from the inside, to love her and *be loved by* her.

When Dawn got home from work, she shook Elizabeth's hand. Angela thought this was tacky but understood that Dawn really did not know how to act under these circumstances. Angela herself didn't know how to act, exactly, only that she needed to act differently now that Dawn was home. The only person that seemed completely at ease was Elizabeth herself, presumably because she was the only one in the room that had nothing to lose.

Angela, Elizabeth, and Dawn ate the mushrooms and put a movie on while they waited—for the drugs to kick in, for the natural course of lust and desire to move bodies into action, for night to fall to hide the savagery of their sins in darkness. Angela was sitting on the floor between Elizabeth's knees while she stroked the back of Angela's neck and played with her hair. While Dawn was in the kitchen getting a beer, Elizabeth leaned down and kissed Angela again. And again, just as Dawn was closing the refrigerator door. "Okay then," was all Dawn said.

Dawn went back to the couch, the movie seemed to be

going on forever, and eventually, inevitably, everyone was kissing everyone else. Upon Dawn's suggestion, the three of them moved to the bedroom. Angela thought Dawn was moving much too quickly, that this ritual should be respected, *revered* even, as the event was so long in the planning, so meticulously thought out in Angela's mind. Dawn leaned forward and kissed Angela, and the only possible way that Angela could endure Dawn's neediness in that moment was to close her eyes and imagine kissing Elizabeth again. As Dawn kissed her the way she had for their entire relationship, Elizabeth laced her fingers through Angela's, as if to say "It's okay. I am right here." Dawn reached down between Elizabeth's legs, and Angela was enraged that she would do that first, without invitation or permission. Although Elizabeth *had* chosen to participate in this illicit activity—wasn't that all the invitation necessary? Then Angela had a revelation. She saw clearly what she must do next in order to proceed as she wished. She let the two of them explore each other's bodies (but *not* souls or hearts!) and moved to a chair at the foot of the bed and watched, indulging the voyeur she knew she was at heart. As she felt her anger dissipate, she went to the kitchen to get a beer, then thought better of it and got a Coke instead. She found beer on the breath slightly revolting when kissing. Although she thought it was possible that it was only distasteful to her when it was Dawn's beer breath. She couldn't recall being bothered by it when kissing other women over the years.

The drugs began weaving their dark magic, and so did the endorphin rush and the awareness of standing in the kitchen naked surrounded by the scandalousness of what was happening in *this* apartment, the obliviousness of all their neighbors. Angela began to feel downright giddy. It didn't matter what Dawn did, Elizabeth belonged to her. When Angela returned to the bedroom Dawn left for a "break," and she was alone with Elizabeth again at last. Angela assumed that Dawn had already been spent—she always came too soon, much to Angela's disappointment throughout their years together. Dawn was capable of lasting much longer when they were using crank,

and that drug also allowed Angela to disassociate from Dawn, so they could quite literally go on for hours, Angela enjoying all the sexual hedonism she could handle without the consequence of being emotionally present.

Now that Angela and Elizabeth were alone, they kissed and caressed each other, and each small touch felt to Angela like a cluster of tiny miracles, as if they were bringing her a better kind of oxygen, transferred and absorbed skin to skin. Elizabeth looked into Angela's eyes and whispered, "I want to be with *you*." Angela already knew that. A universe of communication passed between them just then, unspoken, for there was no language for what they wanted to say or what they thought or how they felt. Only acknowledgment that a covenant had been made. They wanted each other, but only by literally including Angela's partner would that happen, at least for that evening, at least for the foreseeable future.

Minutes or hours later—it was difficult to know which—the psychedelics had evacuated their systems, and the heat and the process and the energies of the evening slowly dissipated. As sleep approached like a slow-moving fog in the room, they settled in affectionately, peacefully, with Angela in the middle of their California-king bed. After Dawn was out—asleep or unconscious—Angela wrapped her arms around Elizabeth and stroked her lightly until she fell asleep, leaving Dawn to the distant other side. If Angela had been the kind of person to simply have a clandestine affair, this would be the moment when she would have had to leave Elizabeth's bed and go home to that distant sleeping partner from whom she rarely even wanted affection anymore. She drifted in twilight, quite sure that she had made the right decision. She didn't think that she would have been able to bring herself to leave Elizabeth's side. In reality, this was just more delusional musing, this business of a "right decision." Things would not go really badly between Angela and Dawn for a good long while. But when they did, they would unravel with the turbulence of profound insecurities, the acuteness of betrayal, and the violence of hatred.

* * * *

Elizabeth stayed with Angela and Dawn all of Saturday and into Sunday. During that time, Angela knew no reality outside the confines of their apartment and did not care to think beyond the next minute. She was waiting for something terrible to happen, because she did not see a future in which she deserved such bliss as she found in Elizabeth's eyes and words and actions. She could see that, or at least she supposed that Liz was making a concentrated effort to make Dawn feel at ease, to feel included. Angela knew there was no other viable reason for Liz to pay Dawn any attention at all. The whole distorted ballet was being choreographed by Elizabeth now. Sometimes Angela would be gripped by fear again, thinking that Elizabeth had not, in fact, given her heart to her, and that she, addicted to drugs and to alcohol (which was becoming harder and harder to ignore) and now to this woman, this *girl,* was continuing her descent into madness. But then Elizabeth would come near her again, would touch her again, would look into her eyes again, and the terror would go away.

On Sunday, the third day, Angela awoke with a pain in her chest already forming because she knew the fantasy must be shattered and real life allowed to resume. Elizabeth, after all, had a home that was not Angela's home, a home where her things and parts of herself that Angela did not know yet lived, awaiting her return. She had worn Angela and Dawn's clothes all weekend, clothes that were too big for her slender frame. And though Angela did run Liz's through the laundry the night before so she could wear them home that day, surely there were outfits and shoes and other possessions she must miss. Dawn made breakfast for Angela and Elizabeth, as if it were the most natural thing in the world, though Angela noted to herself that Dawn rarely made breakfast for just the two of them on Sunday mornings anymore.

The day proceeded in a lazy sort of way. While Dawn and Liz sat in lawn chairs sunning themselves outside the apartment's back door, Angela took out a pen and a notebook

and wrote a poem for Elizabeth. This is what Angela had done whenever she fell in love. She had even written a poem or two for Dawn back in the beginning, before the construction of resentments and regret, the cultivation of disappointment and despondency. Angela wrote of storms and mists and moonlight and requiems. She strung together words that were about the Elizabeth she knew and the Liz she did not yet know. When Angela wrote, she was connected to the part of herself that became hidden when she was a slave to addiction, material things, responsibility, time. She was connected to the part of herself that was *poet,* the part of herself that was *free*. So in this space of freedom she wrote her love for Elizabeth (without using the word *love* of course), of the precariousness of their situation, of hope and the madness and the tears that would be their fate.

* * * *

Angela had written her first poem when she was in the fourth grade in Mr. Carado's class. It was about an eagle and a hawk who were friends who would not allow one another to be harmed as they flew through the sky all the way to the stars. She did not have any particular friend in mind when she wrote it. She was only sure that she was the hawk and that she needed such an eagle friend in her young life. Perhaps she instinctively knew that she did not have such a friend and that she would long for one for most of her days, that this longing would lead to failed romantic and platonic relationships because for her the line between the two would always be blurry.

Not long after that she was recognized as a brilliant child, a gifted child, and was put through a series of intelligence tests. At the conclusion of those tests and meetings between her parents and her grade school's administrators, Angela was placed in a special program for talented or exceptional students. Angela understood that this meant she was smarter than most others her age, and she liked that, but this program also meant that she would be labeled as special, as other, and she wished neither to be special nor separate other than in her own mind.

More than anything, she wished to be more like everyone else, not less. Angela knew, perhaps even from birth, that she was inherently flawed in some fundamental way. For most of her life she would identify this quality of hers with various adjectives: broken, defective, irredeemable, even evil. In truth, there was nothing fractured about Angela at all, but it would take several decades for her to know that, and even once she did, she would still, on occasion, resort to thinking of herself in these terms, gripped by fits of insecurity and self-loathing.

Since Angela did not wish to be Other, at least externally, she maintained a concentrated effort for the next year to make herself more average on paper. She intentionally got lower scores on tests and homework, she acted out in ways inappropriate for children of her caliber (she brought her older sister's Playgirl magazines to the lunchroom), and she quite unintentionally developed "unnatural" attachments to her attractive, female teachers. Before the summer break, her parents were summoned to the vice principal's office, where they were informed that Angela would be returning to regular classes the following year. Her parents, understandably, were quite devastated, but Angela could not have been more relieved.

* * * *

Angela gave Elizabeth the poem when she drove her back to her apartment later that afternoon. She did not say, "Tell me how you like it," or any such sentiment, because to do so would betray what the writing of the poem actually signified. To ask for an opinion would trivialize the entire art of poetry, for one does not write poetry for approval or influence or notoriety. The poet writes to express herself in the only way she knows how. By gifting Elizabeth with words, Angela believed that her intentions and expectations were clear, that what she was really doing by writing a poem was devoting herself and professing that devotion. There was no need to have a discussion about what the words meant or did not mean. All that mattered was that they had been written. She knew that Elizabeth understood these things.

“I need to tell you something,” Liz said. In seconds, Angela went through a thousand scenarios that would end in Liz telling her that what happened this past weekend would never happen again. “Don’t look so worried. Listen, when I go to work tomorrow, I’m handing in my two weeks’ notice. The lease will be up on my apartment. I need to go home for the summer.”

Angela believed that this was true but now had a whole new series of events to panic about: what would happen to Elizabeth and Angela when Elizabeth went back home for the summer? That had not occurred to her, focused as she was on their day-to-day, hour-by-hour. “I am not leaving for another month, and I will only be gone for six weeks,” Elizabeth said, reading Angela’s mind in a way that would come to both charm and vex her. When Elizabeth got out of the car and walked up the path to her building, Angela ached. She would continue to ache until she saw her at work the next day, and then she would ache more when Elizabeth went home for the summer. Angela would always ache in this way between the times Elizabeth went away and the times she returned.

When the affair was into its second week, Dawn and Angela invited Elizabeth to join them in their amphetamine use, though, of course, severely understating the frequency and quantity of their own consumption. That first time it made her slightly ill, visibly, and though she would never enjoy it as much as Angela did, she would certainly seem to develop a taste for it later on. Not long after that night, Liz asked Angela if this drug was a *problem*, and Angela said, “Not at all.” Elizabeth’s response was, “Good. I don’t want to be with an addict.” Internally, Angela heard her own voice respond, “And I don’t want to be one. But I’m pretty sure that I am.”

The bond between Elizabeth and Angela took on several new dimensions at once. It became infinitely deeper, astonishingly stronger, and unfathomably more *real*. In the small hours of the next morning, Dawn, who could be counted upon to abandon narcotics for booze, went to bed. Angela and Elizabeth did not. They talked, they said nothing, they empathized, they congealed. They read each other their years of poetry and short

stories. They shared secrets and fears and devastatingly shame-filled accounts of moments in their lives. They wept together in equal measures of joy and sorrow. In the end, they did the only thing they had not done, they said “I love you” to one another.

* * * *

When Elizabeth was not present (and occasionally when she was) Dawn and Angela had several discussions trying to negotiate their way around Angela’s idea (new to Dawn) of having an open relationship. In reality, of course, this was not what Angela wanted at all. She could not admit to Dawn what she really wanted, because that was too terrifying. What Angela wanted even more than to be with Elizabeth was to *not* be with Dawn. Angela’s dilemmas could be condensed down to a simple truth: the relationship with Dawn was over and had been for some time, even before Elizabeth. Angela stayed because she was petrified to leave. Dawn embodied the only security that Angela had ever known, and sanctuary is an undeniably powerful force. Over time she had come to depend on Dawn for practically everything, including managing their finances. Normally when one is contemplating changing their life, there is a miniature movie that plays on the mind’s screen of what the future could look like, a lucid daydream, images of goals achieved, ambitions realized, toils reaching fruition march across the inner eye with a soundtrack of resounding, joyful trumpets. But Angela’s screen was quite blank and quite silent. So she introduced the idea of giving up monogamy. She knew before she suggested it that Dawn would agree, because Dawn would rather withstand infidelity than have Angela leave her.

In the weeks leading up to Elizabeth’s departure for the summer, the three of them spent most of their free time together. Angela and Elizabeth also spent quite a bit of time together that Dawn did not know about. Time in the evening increased after Elizabeth’s last day at work, and Angela counted the days every day until Elizabeth was leaving for home. The three of them stayed in and watched movies and ordered takeout; they went

out together and drank in campus bars. Elizabeth enjoyed making a spectacle of their affair. She would kiss each woman in turn just to watch the facial expressions of the other patrons. Angela enjoyed watching the men who could not have her. During all these days and hours and minutes, none of the three ever mentioned the fact that open relationships, by definition, meant each partner *could* see more than one other person. Still, the three of them read a book about polyamory, joined online Yahoo groups, and attended local meetings with other poly enthusiasts. When Elizabeth left for home, Angela began compulsively dating other women she had met through these groups simply as a means of distracting herself from the enormity of Elizabeth's absence. Dawn kept professing that she hadn't met anyone she liked yet, other than Liz, of course. But Angela knew Dawn, better than Dawn knew herself, and Dawn had a fair amount of lust for Liz, if nothing else, and there almost certainly *was* something else.

* * * *

When Elizabeth returned for the fall semester, she leased her own apartment rather than having a roommate. This opened a terrifying chasm of opportunity: now Angela and Dawn could spend the night *alone* with Elizabeth without the other present. It was so utterly distasteful, so monumentally detestable to Angela that Dawn would get to do this, but she also knew that she must silently bear witness, that she must allow this to happen in order to keep moving forward in what had now become a tempest of half-spoken emotions.

On the night that Dawn had her *turn* with Elizabeth, (how it sickened Angela that either of them should speak of her in these terms) Angela went out on a date with a friend she had known for years and had always found attractive. She had to do *something*, she had to drown out the static of jealousy and betrayal and despair. Angela had insisted that Dawn have her night first, in the interest of getting the painfulness of it over with as quickly as possible. She did not know what had to happen to

ensure that this abomination of circumstance never happened again, but she pleaded with gods and goddesses and ancestors and anything else out there that could hear her to make sure that it was so. When Dawn returned the next morning, Angela forced out, “How was it?” then braced herself for the answer. Dawn said, “We had a lot of fun. But then we spent the rest of the night talking about you.”

Oh.

The following weekend was Angela’s. She didn’t think of it as her “turn,” of course. She considered spending the night alone with Elizabeth her right. After all, she was the one who loved her. Angela had been to Elizabeth’s new apartment before, both with and without Dawn, but Angela and Elizabeth had not made love in that place. To Angela, the space was still sacred because of that; it did not matter what Dawn had done there because Dawn did not matter when Angela and Elizabeth were together. When they laid down in Elizabeth’s bed, Angela could smell the fabric softener on the sheets, and it pleased her to know that she had laundered them after Dawn, as if she wanted to wash away the memory of that night. Angela was not foolish or disillusioned about their sex; she knew that Liz had a modicum of pure physical attraction to Dawn. She was a physically attractive person. She also knew, though, that in the grand scheme of things, it did not mean anything, it would not be missed, and it would soon be over.

As she unlaced Elizabeth’s top, Angela’s hands began to shake, something she had never experienced before, at least, not while undressing someone. Her feeling was so expansive, their passion so devastatingly beautiful, being alone this way was beyond what her nervous system could process. Stopping for a moment, she looked deep into Elizabeth’s eyes, questioning, no, begging, for some semblance of confirmation that she was not in this moment alone. Elizabeth whispered, “I know,” and then kissed Angela deeply, devotedly, hungrily.

Chapter 4

Winter arrived seemingly without warning, but surely a gradual change in the temperature had been happening over time. Perhaps it was more that Angela hadn't noticed because of the palpable change in barometric pressure at home; the atmosphere had become chilled and stormy. A shift in circumstance in late October had precipitated this deviation in the emotional weather.

Elizabeth had tried to end the relationship with Angela and Dawn on multiple occasions earlier in the month. Angela was sure it was because she found the situation had become too boring…or too complex. Perhaps it was because she had such a lack of emotion for one of them and too much for the other. Whatever Elizabeth's reasons had been, Angela used a barrage of emotionally manipulative tactics to convince her to stay each time. After these multiple attempts, Elizabeth sat down with Dawn and, as diplomatically as possible, told her that she did not feel a *connection* with her. She essentially asked for Dawn's permission to continue seeing Angela, and only Angela. Angela knew, and Dawn probably knew, that by making this Dawn's choice, Elizabeth could absolve herself of responsibility. She wasn't a *homewrecker*, after all. Dawn also likely knew that if she said no, Angela would have continued seeing Liz anyway, and Dawn wasn't ready to lose her entirely. Dawn likely thought, "If I grant this to her, she will love me again, and she will stay." So she said yes, claiming that her only wish was for Angela to be happy. Which, Angela knew, was another lie.

To Angela, Dawn now became the Bad Girl she had fantasized about as a teenager, the one who wore leather, drank heavily, did drugs, lived on the edge. She began to imagine that Dawn owned a motorcycle and had tattoos—in reality she had neither. Dawn was also the Hero, Angela often reminded herself, the one who would fix her when she was feeling broken, the one who promised to always take care of her. Dawn was the anchor to some kind of stability, yes, and also the deliverer into corruption. Angela indulged in things with Dawn that she would

never dream of doing with Elizabeth: an assortment of drugs to excess, pornography, sex that bordered on sadomasochism. There was, however, no love, not even affection anymore.

On the other hand, Elizabeth embodied all the things that Angela revered as a romantic ideal: Intelligence, appreciation of the Arts, talent and yes, love. Most importantly, to Angela, Elizabeth was Good. She was unaddicted, often fearless, and ambitious. There was no complacency within her, no settling. To Angela that was inspiring, and she often found that Elizabeth's inherent goodness had the effect of making her want to also be good. She was frequently sober and clearheaded when she was with Elizabeth, for she wanted the clarity of mind to be able to both experience and memorize every detail of their moments together. She knew instinctively that someday she would need accurate recall in order to adequately pine.

The other severe variation in the winds of their fates was that Elizabeth had rekindled a relationship with a boyfriend she'd been with on and off since high school. Angela would later learn that this on again—off again was a pattern with Elizabeth. This boyfriend, Dustin, was also attending the university in town, which Angela knew meant that there would be competition between them for Liz's attention while they were in close geographical distance. She had explained the rules of polyamory to him, and he'd agreed to participate. Like Angela, he was of course only willing to make allowances for Elizabeth to have other lovers because it was better than being without her.

In November, Angela met Dustin for the first time. They liked each other immediately, so much so that Angela thought Elizabeth was actually displeased with their camaraderie. Angela developed a habit of taking them both out and getting them drunk, as they were both still underaged in a college town. Whenever the three of them went anywhere, the evenings always ended the same: Angela and Dustin waiting awkwardly, nervously for Elizabeth to decide who she was taking home, neither really understanding how the decision was made.

In time, Angela and Dustin would develop their own complicated relationship independent of Liz (Dustin also called

her by her short name), and they would spend a great deal of time together in the months to come whenever they were both separated from Elizabeth by the yawning distance from their city to her hometown. They would commiserate in a way that no other two people would ever be able to, bound together by their infinite devotion to a woman who would choose neither of them in the end.

* * * *

When Angela was in seventh grade, she cut school one afternoon with her friend Maria. The two thought that they were incredibly smart and would never get caught, because they had carefully planned a ruse. First they walked the length of town, stopping at a convenience store to buy Teen and Tiger Beat. Then they went to Angela's house and cooked one of the frozen pizza's that was standard in Angela's family's freezer. They wrapped the empty pizza box in paper towels and took it to the garbage cans outside the house rather than leaving it in the kitchen trash. Then they hid their backpacks and school things in the furnished basement of Angela's house and went across the street to the park and waited to see Angela's mother pull into the driveway. They waited another fifteen minutes, then walked into the house as if they had just arrived home from school.

When Angela saw her mother standing in the kitchen with the wooden spoon in her hand and her hands on her hips, she knew that despite their careful planning, they had not, in fact, gotten away with anything. Angela's mother calmly told Maria to go downstairs and get her things and leave. In slow motion, Angela watched Maria disappear then reappear on the basement stairs, say nothing, and run out the back door. Angela knew what came next.

Angela had been disciplined through physical violence before. The wooden spoon was her mother's weapon of choice, depending on the severity of the crimes. Sometimes there was no additional object with which to implement pain, only an open palm. These circumstances were not a daily or even weekly

occurrence—physical harm was only a necessity if Angela did something really bad, not simple misbehavior that was expected of her age. That sort of indiscretion was usually met only with icy, intentional silence, and a pervasive emanation of disapproval.

Because these clashes were not commonplace, and because Angela's childhood was at a time when corporal punishment was still prevalent, Angela did not see anything wrong with this practice for decades. She also felt for most of her younger years that she had deserved such punishment. Believing that she was inherently inadequate and flawed, it was not at all hard to add "deserving of abuse" to the structure of her self-image.

With this dynamic firmly in place within her household, Angela learned how to detect quiet rage. She also became quite skilled at monitoring her own anger so that it would become directed more and more inward as she grew older. By the time she was an adult, she had become a master of self-inflicted pain, both physical and psychological. For complementary punishment, she also continued to develop the skill of withstanding the wrath of others. Everyone, though, even the most seasoned self-loather, has a limit.

* * * *

Out of stark fear, Angela was always trying to find some reason to stay with Dawn. There was a part of Angela that believed what Dawn had often spouted during her drunken blackouts; that she would "be nothing" without Dawn. Her hero had packed up her life and moved a thousand miles to be with Angela, to support her while she was a student, to handle overwhelming financial matters, to keep Angela's ego intact by fawning and complementing and bolstering. Angela felt like she owed Dawn. But when she dug deep within her heart for compassion, sympathy, empathy, she found none. No matter how many constraints they put on Angela's relationship with Elizabeth, things continued to deteriorate. Angela tried half-heartedly to heed Dawn's demands: only one overnight a month,

only seeing Liz twice a week, phone calls limited to fifteen minutes within earshot, all these feeble attempts to limit Angela's unquenchable love. Dawn eventually gave Angela an ultimatum, and Angela adhered to her decision for about a week, then resumed seeing Elizabeth behind Dawn's back. By the time the relationship between Angela and Dawn had been stripped of all but the raw nerve, Angela and Elizabeth were locked into their on-again—off-again pattern. This occurred with dependable regularity, one of them deciding on one day that the whole situation was just too difficult, only to return on another proclaiming that they simply could not stay away.

Angela and Dawn began to fight about sex, drugs, and alcohol, the only three things that had still bound them together by even the thinnest thread. The conflicts became increasingly frequent and progressively louder, and Angela began to develop a feeling she had long ago with her mother: an ever-present combination of indignance, sorrow, and fear. Dawn had never raised a hand to Angela, but that did not mean that she never would. Sometimes Angela would have preferred that, as the emotional abuse had become particularly vicious.

Things went on this way until Angela was less afraid of being the victim of attack and more concerned about being the perpetrator. Her entire life, anger had never been Angela's primary emotion. Though she was often quick to an emotional response, it was usually sadness or disappointment. Still, in the six years that Dawn had been crawling around under her skin with passive-aggressive comments and behaviors, some real fury had festered. So Angela began to worry that, with her lack of impulse control, she might do something that she could not come back from. It was unimaginable to her now that she had ever loved Dawn, or even liked her.

Yet Angela stayed and stayed, partly because she felt deserving of Dawn's punishment, but also because, unconsciously, she was developing a theory. The suspicion had been forming, perhaps from the moment she met Elizabeth, that if she decided to leave Dawn, it had to be a commitment that Angela made to *herself* and no one else. She knew, even if she

could not yet admit it to herself on a conscious level, that if she left Dawn *for* Elizabeth, she would be doomed to a hell even more grisly than the one she was already in. So while Angela and Elizabeth were in an “off” phase, Angela left Dawn.

She moved in with her drug-dealer-turned-best-friend Carol. Carol was generous with Angela, kept her medicated on a regular basis, alternating between hash and crank. If she had not, Angela might very well have committed suicide, for by now she was contemplating it on a fairly regular basis. She and Dawn had called this time with Carol a “trial separation,” but Angela had already decided that this was only the first step in dismantling their life together. She was ready, despite the terror and depression. Once she had removed herself from their home and had Carol’s constant support, Angela had multiple revelations and spontaneous moments of clarity about all that had been wrong with her relationship with Dawn from the very beginning, long before Elizabeth, long before crank. Her resolve grew in tandem with her resentments. She did not absolve herself of her affair with Elizabeth, but it became increasingly clear that their romance was a complete and separate thing entirely. Her only regret about it was that she met Elizabeth while she was committed to another, because, due to her own heartbreaking past, she never wanted to be a cheater. She was sorry that she had hurt Dawn, regardless of the pain that Dawn had returned. But she was not at all sorry that she had left.

Carol and Angela’s workplace had a generous paid winter break between Christmas and New Year’s Day, so the two of them settled in for movies, snow, junk food, and a week-long slumber party. Three days after Christmas, Angela was ruminating on the trials and tribulations of her relationship with Elizabeth as, true to their custom, they were back in contact again. They had spoken briefly on the phone, but Angela didn’t tell Liz where she was or what had transpired during this most recent hiatus. During this time, Angela talked to Carol with a vulnerability that she rarely allowed or displayed anymore, but she felt safe with her. Angela rarely spoke to anyone about Elizabeth because she did not wish to be judged, but she felt that Carol was a

complex person, so she might understand the complexity of that relationship. Also, Carol had been in the company of Elizabeth and Angela as a couple, so she must have seen what Angela saw—two confused people with a lot of potential despite their self-destructive habits. Angela believed that Carol could see that in them because Carol herself was the same.

While they talked and played cards sitting cross-legged on Carol's bed, Angela kept glancing up at the clock because she knew what time the train would be arriving, bringing Elizabeth and Dustin back to their university town. Carol dropped her cards on the bed and said, "Just go get her. I know that's what you want to do, what you need to do. Bring them both back here, and we'll extend the Christmas party."

* * * *

Elizabeth lived on the ground floor, so when Angela rang the buzzer she could see through the glass when Elizabeth peeked around the corner of her door. The speaker never worked, only the buzzer. When Angela saw her, the endorphins flooded in, and she couldn't help but think how similar the sensation was to snorting her very first line of the day or evening. Elizabeth looked only slightly surprised to see Angela standing there. She opened the building's front door and said a very tentative, "Hi?"

"Hi."

"What's going on?"

"Something."

"Okay. Well, you're not crying, that's a good sign."

"I left."

"What?"

"I left. Her. Well, we said it was a trial separation but I already know I'm not going back."

"Wow."

"Can I come in?"

"Oh! Yeah, come in!"

Elizabeth hugged Angela inside the doorway and started to cry.

Angela said, “It’s going to be okay.”

“I know. I just…need a minute for that to really sink in.”

“You and me both, honey. Liz?”

“Yeah?”

“No matter what happens from here on out, I love you. You know that, don’t you? No matter what. I will *always* love you.”

“I *do* know that.”

When they got to the apartment door, Dustin was standing in the hallway. Dustin and Angela hugged cordially, and Angela asked if they had any plans for the next forty-eight hours. Dustin and Elizabeth looked at each other and shrugged. Angela informed them that they were coming with her to Carol’s, so they picked up the duffle bags they had probably just dropped an hour ago and followed her outside. Angela had previously introduced Dustin to both her drug of choice and Carol, so both he and Elizabeth knew what to expect walking into her house for an entire weekend. But even Angela was surprised at Carol’s generosity for the next two days. Angela believed that it was driven by her own loneliness; it was, after all, a holiday break, and, at the moment, the three of them were really the only family she had.

In the early hours of the second morning, Elizabeth, Angela, and Carol were all affectionately entangled in Carol’s bed. The night before, Carol and Dustin had been playing video games and alternating lines of crank and smoking pot in the kitchen while Elizabeth and Angela made love. Angela could not tell if their lovemaking went on for several hours or several minutes, only that it was physically and emotionally even more intense than she had remembered. When Dustin crawled back to the living room couch to pass out again, Carol came into the room and got into the bed, Elizabeth was already asleep. Carol and Angela talked in hushed tones for an hour or two, and the last thing Angela said before she drifted off to sleep was, “This can’t all be in vain. It just can’t.” Carol tucked both of them in with a mother’s tenderness, for they were, after all, the cubs in her den.

* * * *

Not long after, Angela officially moved out of the apartment she had shared with Dawn for almost seven years. The trial separation was over, and Angela knew that she needed to take action, quickly. She could not stay with Carol any longer. Angela could feel her becoming possessive and suspected she might have developed ideas about expanding their relationship into something more than friends. Although Angela *did* find herself sexually attracted to Carol once in a while, she had no interest in pursuing that, being quite sure that scenario could only end in disaster, possibly even death. Angela cared deeply for Carol, but she was a dangerous woman with a dangerous past that always threatened to reappear.

So Angela went back to the apartment a week after the new year began to get some more clothes and belongings. Dawn was in the kitchen when she walked in, though Angela had intentionally gone when she thought Dawn was at work. Dawn took two steps toward Angela as if to embrace her, and Angela recoiled. “I met someone,” said Dawn, hopefully, as if this news would magically and instantly fix everything, as if somehow they could go back now. Too much had been broken and too much had been said, the distance between them hopelessly and irreversibly vast. Dawn was a blackout drunk, so she had very little recall of the things she had said or done, not just over the last several months but over the last several years. But Angela had not forgotten.

“Listen,” Dawn started to say but Angela interrupted and said quite matter-of-factly, “It’s over.” She felt frighteningly calm and detached as she watched Dawn’s face crumble. Angela realized that tremendous power came from voicing this firm decision. She felt in that moment as free-spirited and independent as she had in the time between her acceptance to the university and meeting Dawn. She had a premonition that anything could happen now, that her options were endless, and that perhaps, just perhaps, she would wind up living a life beyond her wildest dreams. The words she’d spoken had freed her. Angela had not even been aware that she was going to say them until they’d been said, and when they were, she knew the

words were right. If she'd taken the time to really think about what she wanted to say to Dawn, her speech would have come out all wrong and too long. She either would have been too cruel or too lenient. So perhaps it was by design that Dawn was home after all, even though Angela had hoped she wouldn't be.

Dawn whined, "So just like that?"

"It is not 'just like that' and you know it. We've been headed here for a long time."

Dawn, in what Angela thought was a rare moment of adulthood and sobriety, did not argue or beg, manipulate or posture. Instead she said, "This is your home. You should stay here until you find a place." Believing that would be fine and supposing that they could both be civil for a few weeks would prove to be a grave miscalculation on Angela's part.

The first week was not terrible. Angela was bothered by the tension that seeped everywhere in the apartment, but she could tolerate it with a glass of wine and a Percocet. Dawn moved into the guest room and Angela stayed in the master bedroom when she was there and not at Elizabeth's. She looked at apartments every other day and began methodically packing things that belonged only to her. She did not want anything they had acquired together, aside from the odd present or two from her parents. She did not want to take anything of the life she had with Dawn into her new existence. A clean break, a fresh start, that, she believed, would be psychologically freeing. Some part of Angela still believed herself to be deserving of punishment though. Regardless of the fact that she and Dawn would have ended whether Elizabeth had happened or not, there was still behavior for which she felt she must atone and the accompanying guilt. So she made part of her packing ritual the systematic tearing down of their photo wall: hundreds of framed photos and collage frames of good times, memories, comingled families, vacations, day trips, and so on. It was a painful act to take them all down, remove photos from frames, separate into piles of 'hers' and 'mine'. This was her penance.

The first weekend that Angela was back in the apartment, she met Dawn's new lover, Patty. Angela and Patty hit it off right

away: they had many things in common, and they enjoyed each other's company. Dawn seemed to resent Angela's easy way with Patty, much as her effortless connection with Dustin seemed to unnerve Elizabeth. Angela began to wonder if she was not better romantically matched to her lovers' lovers rather than her own partners of choice. Since they got along so well, Patty, Angela, and Dawn partied together frequently, both because their appetites for escape were nearly equal and because Angela needed something to do when Elizabeth was with Dustin.

Week two at Dawn's was largely the same, but week three took a turn. Patty had to go out of town for a family function, so Angela was left alone with Dawn without a buffer. Elizabeth was no longer welcome in Dawn's home. Angela had stopped trying to convince Dawn that Liz was not the reason for the dissolution of their partnership. If Dawn needed to believe that to survive, that was her problem, and Angela no longer felt as if it were her responsibility to fix Dawn's problems. Angela had somehow forgotten that Dawn knew so much about her, knew better than anyone how to push buttons and make her angry. So with Patty and Elizabeth now absent from their home, the screaming matches and unspoken threats of brutality ensued. Angela had places to go and stay and sleep besides Elizabeth's apartment, but when she fought these battles with Dawn she wanted to be comforted, held, reassured. She did not want to acknowledge that the more she sought these things out, the more Elizabeth seemed to withdraw. She did not want to accept that the closer she got to actually moving out and moving on, the more Liz seemed to be spending time with Dustin. Above all, she avoided any recognition at all of the signs that Elizabeth would probably leave her, and soon.

Part 2

I want someone who is fierce and will love me until death and knows that love is as strong as death, and be on my side forever and ever. I want someone who will destroy and be destroyed by me.
—Jeanette Winterson, *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*

Chapter 5

The neon lights were making Angela's eyes hurt so she closed them. She had wanted to close them anyway, to block out the lights and the music and the noise of the bar and pretend that she was alone with Jennifer somewhere else. Jennifer the stripper. Jennifer the angel. Jennifer the saving grace and the only thing that really mattered to Angela anymore. Her broken and twisted road had led her here, to the safety of embrace and the magic of sensuality without sex, a reliable outlet for her still beating heart, a small sense of well-being that could simply be purchased for ten dollars a song.

* * * *

After Angela moved into her own apartment Elizabeth began to pull away and kept making excuses to not come to Angela's new place, which Angela did not understand. It was another place for them to be alone together, after all. Angela could not see that as her own world became smaller and smaller, she became more and more dependent on Elizabeth to fulfill her needs. She had forgotten the visceral reaction she'd had the first time they'd kissed, the desire to possess her and feed upon her. Angela only knew how to act in accordance with her feelings, and when she began to feel as if she was losing Elizabeth, she simply redoubled her efforts to prove her worthiness. It would take time for Angela to even begin to understand that, for Elizabeth, any semblance of *neediness* was repellant. It would take even longer for Angela to realize that her own emotional dependence was ironic, for it was one of many aspects that she despised in her

relationship with Dawn. From the beginning of their relationship, whenever Dawn felt vulnerable, or sad, or any uncomfortable feeling really, she sought refuge in Angela because she did not know how to self-soothe in any functional way. Unknowingly, Angela had taken what she'd loathed in Dawn and then turned around and inflicted the same on Elizabeth.

At the beginning of the end (the *first* end, anyway) there was an abundance of drama because both Elizabeth and Angela craved drama. The more Angela tried to not behave like a lunatic, the more insane she appeared. She would show up uninvited at Elizabeth's apartment whenever her calls went unanswered or, worse, were met with a busy signal because Elizabeth had taken her phone off the hook. In Angela's mind, Elizabeth only did these things because she *wanted* Angela to come over, that surely Elizabeth *knew* what her response would be. If she really *didn't* want to be with her then why not just leave, just *not* be home when Angela arrived? Instead, Elizabeth would let Angela inside, they would argue, they would yell, they would cry, they would apologize. Angela would return home confident that she still had a claw in Elizabeth's side. Then she would wake up the next day or the day after with a fresh feeling of insecurity and would start the cycle all over again.

Then Elizabeth began to disappear for days and weekends without telling Angela where she was going or who she was with or when she was going to be back. Angela would call Dustin in a panic, but he would have no idea where she was either. And Angela would wonder just how Dustin could handle it so calmly. Could he teach *her* to handle it? Elizabeth had often made Angela feel as if her insecurity were her own fault, that if she valued herself or loved herself more, she would be fine with things like polyamory and intermittent contact. But Angela was not fine, could not possibly be fine, because things between them had been one way and now they were another.

Other men besides Dustin began to drift onto the scene, hovering around Elizabeth like bees. Angela had become used to the dynamic of the already-established threesome, and the fact that she adored Dustin to a degree made things easier and

even pleasant at times. Angela could not understand what Elizabeth could possibly need that she was not already receiving from one or the other of them. Why were these other interlopers being encouraged? The truth was, what Liz valued most could not be had within the confines of love (at least not Angela's love or Dustin's love); what she really desired was freedom.

One night, Angela went to meet Elizabeth at a campus bar so she could be introduced to Elizabeth's new 'friend,' Cameron. It was a weeknight but the bar was very crowded and loud, and Angela did not really want to be there at all, but by then the nature of her addiction to Elizabeth was such that she was powerless to say no when she was summoned.

What was clear to Angela immediately was that Cameron had no interest whatsoever in meeting any of Elizabeth's other lovers or in forging bonds the way that Angela had with Dustin. She disliked him immensely and immediately. He presented as arrogant, self-centered, and pretentious. Elizabeth apparently saw something in him that Angela could not see, could not even fathom. As the night wore down, plans were thrown together for a small after-hours gathering at Elizabeth's place with Cameron and three other people whose names Angela could not remember.

After an hour of more or less just watching the rest of them drink more and talk too loudly, Angela closed Elizabeth's bedroom door and went to bed. She, presumably unlike the rest of them, had to get up and go to work in the morning. Money was much tighter for her now that she was living on her own, so her methamphetamines were no longer in constant supply. Angela was grumpy, tired, lovesick, and frustrated, so even though she needed to sleep, she could not. She lay awake and listened to the muffled voices laughing and cajoling, reveling in their early-twenties lives, not yet old enough to know that they were not invincible. After another hour, she heard doors closing and people saying goodbye. But the music remained on and the bedroom door stayed closed. Angela knew that Cameron was still there. Angela needed every bit of will power in every one of her cells to keep from going out there, to keep silent instead of inquiring whether Liz was coming to bed, to keep herself from

assessing Liz and Cameron's closeness and piecing together what was or was not happening there.

When she awoke in the morning, the music was still on but it was significantly softer. Elizabeth was partially wrapped around her from behind, and any anger that Angela had the night before seeped out of her onto the sheets. Angela tried to gather these negative feelings back into herself, thinking they might make her stronger, able to get up and get out and go to work. She made little sweeping motions with one of her hands toward her open mouth, trying to breathe some negativity back in the way you can suck smoke back into your lungs once you have exhaled. She thought antipathy would protect her from further harm, would give her courage to walk away from Elizabeth before she was destroyed by the endless fire of her, but all willfulness failed. She gently laced her fingers through Elizabeth's and let a few tears fall silently down her face.

* * * *

Angela waited and waited and waited some more for Elizabeth to do what Angela could not. She tried to prepare herself in some way for the rejection, for the ending. When it came it was not nearly as ostentatious as she had anticipated. Angela had also incorrectly assumed that Elizabeth would be cruel in the severing of their ties; instead, she was diplomatic, gracious even. Angela was actually disappointed. Callousness would have made it easier for her to disengage.

Angela very much enjoyed when her life looked like a film, so the sorrow of this occasion was muted slightly by the cinematography of it. As they stood in Elizabeth's apartment and talked of their love in terms of a tragedy of timing, Angela could see in her peripheral vision and through the windows the sun setting in the distance, hues of purple and gold filtering through the budding trees of summer, as the apartment gradually darkened. They spoke of how their desires at that particular moment in time were vastly different, that Elizabeth could not provide what Angela needed. They talked about how it might

have worked in another place and another time (which planted the smallest mustard seed of hope within Angela). It was somewhat gratifying for Angela that she was actually participating in their ending rather than being a helpless bystander watching circumstances spiral beyond her control. These ruminations engraved themselves onto Angela's memory as they embraced, then parted, all with such a glorious backdrop, a perfect ending scene.

Hours later though, when the sediments of suffering had settled in, Angela completely unraveled. She spent the next several weeks watching herself behave in the most *shameful* ways. So tremendous was her agony that she did not go to work for that entire first week, calling in sick. She wasn't being dishonest; she *was* ill. She suffered from the sickness of heartbreak, of betrayal, of soul-tearing, gut-wrenching pain. She did not shower for days, she did not go outside, she did not eat or sleep. She had Carol deliver drugs to her door, then sent her away. When all the drugs were gone (which did not take long at all), she drank until she passed out, and when she awoke, she would drink until she passed out again.

She returned to work during the day, but her nights became a flurry of activity. She began to stalk Elizabeth from the parking lot and outside stairwells of the building across the street from her apartment, waiting for hours just for the chance to watch her come and go. Very late at night, she would risk parking around the corner and walking all the way up to Elizabeth's ground-floor window, though she never could see anything other than rumpled blankets over bodies in the bedroom since the curtains were always almost completely closed. One night, Angela discovered that Cameron's car doors were unlocked, and she got in and went through whatever was laying around on the seats (papers, cassette tapes, a sweatshirt, a folder containing Liz's resume, gum wrappers), not sure exactly what she was hoping to find. When that didn't satisfy her, she turned the headlights on to drain his battery, developing an elaborate fantasy about Liz and Cameron arguing the next day about who had driven home and who had left the lights on.

Eventually, Angela organically reached her unconscious threshold of self-imposed torture. The sharpness of the pain became dull. Stalking lost its thrill. Crying all the time began to make her eyes hurt all the time. She withdrew from her friendship with Dustin because being with him only reminded her of Elizabeth, and she no longer wished to be reminded. She began to want to feel better, but *good* feelings were still uncomfortable and unfamiliar. So the desire slowly shifted to one of blotting out memories and not feeling anything at all. And Angela turned all of the attention that she had so precisely focused on Elizabeth toward narcotics and escapism and her own desire for oblivion.

She went out partying with acquaintances and haunted the local taverns. Even in straight bars she could usually find at least one willing, mildly intoxicated woman to kiss her passionately in the bathroom or outside behind the bushes or who might allow Angela to almost put her hand down their pants. But Angela did not want to take any of them home because she knew that when she sobered up, she would be disappointed that they were still there, that they were not Elizabeth.

Often she put herself in perilous situations. More than once she had gone to after-hours parties once the bars had closed. Depending upon which bar and which part of town she had finished the evening in, the cast of characters varied dramatically. Sometimes there were guns. Sometimes there were quantities of drugs that were obviously for distribution. And sometimes there were men who seemed capable of cutting Angela's throat if they'd known what she had done—or even thought about doing—with their wives and their girlfriends. To some Angela might have appeared fearless but she was not fearless, she was simply uninterested in her own well-being.

And now she was in the strip club, with her stripper, named Jennifer, and her "friends," celebrating her birthday. She was talking to Dawn and Patty again because Dawn gave Angela money and bought Angela drugs and sometimes paid Angela's bills, though Patty didn't know anything about that. While Angela was getting her extended lap-dance session with

Jennifer (which was far different from how she danced for the men) she had another one of those unavoidable moments of clarity and inescapable reality. Over Jennifer's shoulder, Angela saw Dawn, sloppy drunk, belligerent, embarrassing. She saw people she called friends who barely knew her; she saw Carol, whose gift to Angela was a shot of Crown Royal and a card with a free baggie of drugs taped to the inside; there were coworkers from a job Angela was very close to losing; and they were all surrounded by the empty glasses and bottles she had drained in a desperate attempt to escape what she had become. On top of it all, Angela could see her own reflection in the mirror-lined walls of the dancing area behind the DJ booth—a woman who, at that moment, had nothing and no one, who felt the closest to the person she was paying money to touch her whose real name she only knew because another stripper had told her. Pathetic. There was nothing left for her to do in that instant other than what she did: Angela wept.

* * * *

When Angela was eighteen years old, the only relationship she had been in was the one with cheating Joanne that had been going on for two years. Angela had figured out early on that there was another girl Joanne had been with first around the time that the two of them had met. Joanne had had a lover named Betsy. Yet Jo would deny this again and again, telling Angela that Betsy was her best friend, nothing more. In the beginning, Angela chose to believe this, because it was far less complicated to do so than to admit that she was actually someone's secret, someone's forbidden pleasure. Their relationship was shrouded in secrecy anyway because they were engaging in homosexual activity at a time when to do so was still shunned, still looked upon with disgust. So as the relationship with Jo was progressing, Angela was simultaneously navigating her way through coming to terms with her own sexuality. She could not, would not, also deal with the emotional wreckage of acknowledging that she was not Jo's girlfriend but her mistress.

By the time two years had passed, the wall that Angela had placed between herself and the awareness of Jo's romance with Betsy had all but been swept away by the winds of unsustainable discourse. Joanne was an excellent liar, but Angela and Betsy were not. In time, the two of them established their own twisted bond, not entirely unlike the one that Angela would eventually develop with Dustin. And Joanne would ricochet her affections between Betsy and Angela, not unlike Elizabeth with Dustin and Angela.

These early experiences of love, these scenes played out in the development of our understandings and ideas of love, stay with us, just as the ways we are treated by our parents as children initiate synapses in the brain that will be in our heads for the rest of our lives unless we attempt to create new ones. So it would be fair to say that Angela, who once had had a tremendous capacity for deep and meaningful love, was now cursed.

Under these circumstances of romantic deceit and duplicity, Angela had developed a fascination with death. She often wrote about death and blackness and a void within the same poems that she wrote about love, for she imagined that death would feel the same way that love did, that at its striking moment she would long for life, the way she longed for absence of emotion in the face of love. In the parlance of psychotherapy, she might have been considered suicidal, but not seriously suicidal. She wanted only to flirt with death, largely in the interest of gaining someone else's attention.

Since Angela had already developed a propensity for self-harm, (she was a cutter), it was not a large leap to a suicide attempt. Since she did not really have the desire for death (or because she was a coward), she called her friend Laurie to make sure that she was home and accessible before taking ten sleeping pills and washing them down with a Jack & Coke. Earlier in the evening, she had argued with Joanne on the telephone, who had been attempting to break up with her (again). She had also spoken to Betsy, who was so frustrated with their situation she had said, "I'm done. If you want her, you can have her." Angela had, in turn, told Jo, "You will be sorry

when I am gone."

When Angela felt her heartbeat slow and her consciousness begin to fade, she did not panic. People were brought back from the brink of overdose deaths in hospitals all the time. Besides, she had taken ten pills, not twenty or forty. She had taken over-the-counter sleeping pills, not prescription drugs. She called Laurie and said, "I've done something very stupid."

This incident would be the only suicide attempt to be labeled as such in her life. She did not achieve the outcome she wanted—to get Jo to love her and be faithful—and there were multitudes of other unintended consequences—the strain on her friendship with Laurie, the now-constant watchful gaze of her parents. So recognizing the failures of such an overt act of violence upon herself, she found more sustainable ways of self-harm as she grew older.

* * * *

Angela continually honed ways to avoid her grief over Elizabeth. Her regiment of drugs, alcohol, and Jennifer became financially implausible, and she began to have to choose between drugs and Jennifer most paydays. Though their relationship was rooted in fantasy, some eminent truths did develop over time: the stripper did actually care about Angela, and she was worried for her, especially after Angela's breakdown on her birthday. Jennifer had said nothing that night, only held her and comforted her, obviously what Angela needed.

To Angela, this affection, this *caring,* could be nothing but a desire to love her and continue taking care of her, much as Dawn had. So Angela began to insist on receiving some of those things from Jennifer, even though Angela knew this maybe wasn't possible. After all, Jennifer had told her before that no matter how much she might have a genuine fondness for her and despite any real physical attraction, Angela was a paying client. She'd even admitted her own part admirably, saying, "I don't know, maybe it's because you're a woman. But I have let you do things I would not even dream of letting other customers

do.” Meaning, presumably, writing her letters and burning her mixed CDs and making time for Angela even when there was a line of higher paying customers ahead of her.

If Angela had believed that Jennifer was the solution, when she started setting boundaries, she became the problem. Angela interpreted waiting in line behind other customers as a personal affront. Her resentment grew as she felt Jennifer’s behavior become more and more professional—“stripper-like”—and less personal. One night Angela was so frustrated emotionally (she had allowed herself to *feel* for the sake of engaging with Jennifer), stormed out of the club in the middle of a dance—though not with such flourish that she would attract the attention of the bouncers. She drove to a liquor store, bought a bottle of wine, and drank half of it in her car. Then, without allowing any thoughts of what she was doing to creep in, she drove, as if on autopilot, to Elizabeth’s apartment.

Chapter 6

They had not spoken in almost six months. Angela had no idea what Elizabeth would do if she were actually home, whether she might just peek around the door, see who was there, then duck back into her apartment. That seemed likely. She thought though, that perhaps just enough time had passed without any contact at all that Elizabeth might miss her. In a cavernous space deep within Angela, some flame existed that had not been snuffed out by addiction, disappointment, or existential crisis. Despite everything that had happened in her romantic life up until that very moment, somehow a belief in *true* love still prevailed, and beneath all the rubble of her desperate attempts to fill an aching void, *pure* love did, in fact, exist. She did not know if that truth would ultimately be claimed by Elizabeth or not, only that it was an achievement of sorts to have felt it at all. Angela stood on the steps in front of Liz's building for several minutes, letting genuine feeling run through her veins and appreciating that she was still capable of doing so. She took a deep breath, held it for the space of three heartbeats, exhaled, and rang the buzzer.

Elizabeth's face showed no emotion. The two of them locked eyes through the glass, and for a moment or two they both just stood there, while Elizabeth decided which path she was going to choose—the one of outright hostility or the one of least resistance. Angela realized that she had been holding her breath, so she slowly exhaled. Then Liz took a step in her direction. When she got to the door, Angela thought for a split second that she should run away, that she was making a grave error, that proceeding would ultimately snuff out that flame she only realized was still burning moments ago. This sensation was not new; it happened every so often when she was in proximity to Elizabeth because of the tremendous power she had bestowed upon her, the power to hurt and to heal, to raze and rebuild Angela as she wished.

Liz opened the door, then turned around to walk back to her open apartment. Angela followed. The lack of embrace

disappointed Angela, but she was being granted permission to enter the sanctuary, and that was enough. She dutifully followed a few steps behind. Once inside, Elizabeth offered her a drink, and they sat on the futon facing each other.

Liz began, “So, it’s just a coincidence that you showed up tonight?”

Angela was confused; she had no idea what made tonight special or out of the ordinary from any other night other than the fact that they were now together in the same room.

Elizabeth searched Angela’s face for clues of deceit. “Oh, you really *don’t* know, do you?”

Angela shook her head.

“Cameron and I broke up.”

That news washed over Angela like a warm spring, and the muscles in her face did not abide her commands as a very small, very subtle smile began to spread. Brainwaves and rational thought leapt into action, and a clear idea formed in Angela’s head: she was being presented with an opportunity just then to be a *friend* to Elizabeth rather than a lover. Perhaps one would naturally segue into the other. After all, she and Liz had never been friends, really. They had only been two people waiting for a chance to be together.

Angela said, “Do you want to talk about it?”

“You don’t really want to talk about Cameron, do you?”

“I do if you need someone to hear you.”

“Why are you still so good to me?”

“You know why.”

“Because you love me?”

“Yes.”

A pause. “I need to get out of here.”

And so they left, six months of silence eradicated in the space of less than five minutes. Angela did not know yet that this, too, would become a pattern. Each and every time that Angela would return to this relationship, in its various iterations, over multiple years, even when they had both gone through radical psychic and emotional changes, like married couples who reinstate their vows, Angela would always reinvest her devotion.

Liz would also participate in this revisiting fully with each occurrence, but with a completely different and separate set of emotions and motives.

First they went for a bite to eat, during which Elizabeth gave Angela only the abbreviated highlights of news. She had broken things off again with Dustin not long after she had done so with Angela. After that, Cameron had grown distant, preferring to party with his friends rather than spend time with Liz. She could not understand what appeared to be growing disinterest, when he had behaved like such a devotee only weeks earlier. Angela simply could not fathom how it was possible that Elizabeth could not see the irony in this, or maybe she had and chose to say nothing. Because Cameron had tapped into some need of hers, (Angela thought it was the need to be punished, or treated poorly, then realized *that* was the need that she and Dustin could not meet), Liz thought that she had fallen in love.

Cameron and Elizabeth had also engaged in the on again—off again dance. Angela wondered if Elizabeth would ever be capable of a consistent relationship with anyone. Liz told Angela that she had smoked crystal meth with him, which sent Angela into a spiral of shame for ever having introduced her to hard drugs in the first place. But maybe if she had not, Liz would have found her way there with *him* anyway? Angela hated both herself and Cameron for defiling Liz in this way, for imposing things on her that might damage her natural talents and abilities and intelligence in the long run.

Angela had stopped listening to the sickening details with which Elizabeth was recounting her months of Cameron, she could not bear that. She also knew that she must develop this skill of tuning out while appearing to listen, because since there had been one Cameron, there would inevitably be others. There would be false hopes for Elizabeth, distorted beliefs about what she wanted and what kind of partner she needed and who she was and who she could become. Angela would be there watching and waiting for her to realize, finally, that all she had ever needed was to accept what was right in front of her.

After dinner they went to a bar and watched a local band,

whose lead singer was a friend of Angela's. On a break in their set, the friend came over to say hello and gave Angela a look that clearly said, "I thought you were done with this bitch?" while smiling at Liz and saying, "It's nice to see you again!" They left halfway through the second set and Angela stopped by the liquor store for more wine, then drove to her own apartment instead of Elizabeth's. There was no audible objection.

It felt strange to Angela, this role of *friend,* but it was not unpleasant. Elizabeth was more than a little drunk, but Angela poured her another glass of wine anyway and encouraged her to keep talking—about her hurt, her anger, her disappointment. She talked more about Cameron, then drifted into remorse and guilt about Dustin, about hurting him, abandoning him. (Presumably she also had this guilt about Angela but did not say, isn't that why she was here?) When Liz began to cry, Angela felt the slightest twinge of satisfaction. She did not think that Elizabeth had ever been exposed to rejection in her life, but it definitely sounded like she had a brush with it from Cameron. Angela was not taking pleasure in Elizabeth's pain, not at all. If anything, it pierced her heart to see her suffer. But she thought that perhaps now that Liz had become familiar with this feeling of disavowal, she might become more cognizant of how her own repudiations affected others. The part of Angela that was ten years Elizabeth's senior was invested in her emotional growth, the blossoming of her adulthood.

After a brief look that Angela interpreted as "Please don't take advantage of my vulnerability," she drew Elizabeth to her. As she continued to weep, Angela held her and stroked her hair until the tears slowed to an intermittent trickle. Elizabeth put her head in Angela's lap, and Angela berated herself internally for having a flash of intense sexual desire in the face of her beloved's distress. It passed, at least enough for Angela to ignore it, and she continued to run her fingers through Elizabeth's hair, occasionally caressing her face. For the first time in almost a year, Angela felt a sense of unquestionable peace. As she realized its unfamiliar presence, she tried to put words to the feelings and found she could not. They remained

that way on the couch until they both fell asleep. It was the first time they had ever spent the night together and not made love.

Angela tried for the next several days to adjust herself, to reshape her thoughts and actions, to this new role of friend that had been bestowed upon her. She refrained from making any sort of sexual overtones in their conversations and, although her physical affection certainly crossed an invisible platonic barrier, she did not try to kiss Elizabeth. Such restraint was a monumental feat of will that Angela had to fortify with drugs that were more in the sedative arena rather than her usual stimulants. She had recently had the good fortune of being handed a giant Ziploc bag of Valium and Darvocet by a coworker. She did not ask why this person was in abundance of such vast quantities. She did not ask why these were being given to her and not someone else. A gift was a gift.

This curtailing of desire, however, was ultimately not sustainable for either of them. A week or two after the night on the couch, Angela, Elizabeth, and Dustin were out again together, as if the three of them had all traveled to various geographical locations and then returned home to one another. Elizabeth had been wounded by Cameron, so she had come back to where she, though likely loath to admit it, felt safest. They had been drinking at an off-campus bar, and Angela, mellowed with her new while-with-Liz Valium buzz, was in a jocular mood and felt funnier than usual—Angela knew she had a quick wit, but she often found it hard to keep up with her intellectual counterparts. Toward the end of the evening, Liz simply announced to Dustin, “I’m taking her home tonight and fucking her.” Usually, Elizabeth was much more subtle in choosing; Angela actually found this direct approach unsettling, bordering on vulgar, not to mention outrageously confident. Angela wondered what Liz would do if either she or Dustin ever dared to refuse. Angela could not speak for Dustin, but for herself, she knew that she and Elizabeth were bonded by some force governed in the celestial spheres, that there was an element of fate entwining them at all times, and that element was more powerful than any human will. So, despite any

distastefulness in the way the opportunity was voiced, she went home with her.

Once inside Angela was confused. “I didn’t think you wanted…” but Elizabeth said, “Shut up,” and kissed her. She pushed Angela against the wall in the short hallway just inside the door and gently bit her lip, then nipped her throat a little bit harder. This aggressiveness was new, and Angela tried to interpret what it might mean. Had Cameron liked things rough and Elizabeth discovered that she did also? Angela had a moment of distaste and for a split second she pushed Liz away. But Elizabeth interpreted that as a challenge in context, so she threw her body against Angela’s, pinning her to the wall with adequate force, pushing her thigh between Angela’s legs. Angela’s knees went weak, and she surrendered completely to Elizabeth’s control as they made their way pushing and pulling and stripping their clothes off on their way to the bedroom.

Angela and Elizabeth seemed to be quite certainly *back together*, at least, that was how Angela read their status. Liz had become responsive to phone calls again, and seemed to want to spend time with Angela, both with and without Dustin. She had been telling Angela that she loved her on a more regular basis, and she seemed sincere. They even began planning the logistics of what would ultimately become a long-distance affair, as Elizabeth had no intention of staying in the university town where Angela and Dustin were. Dustin had one more semester of school, but Liz would be graduating. Angela was grateful for this because if they had both been graduating and moving back home, Angela could not quite convince herself that Elizabeth would come back to visit just with her. But with Dustin still there too, Elizabeth would have a harder time staying away. Besides, “back home” wasn’t really that far away—about two hours—and Angela actually enjoyed driving; she liked the feeling of wind in her hair with the stereo turned up. That felt like freedom.

This newfound passion that Elizabeth had for Angela was ultimately short-lived. Just as Angela began to feel some semblance of security in their relationship, Elizabeth changed her behavior without warning. To Angela, it seemed that the very

second things carried any sentiment of contentedness, Liz became restless. This no longer came as a surprise, but it made Angela anxious because she could never anticipate what new way this restlessness would manifest. It did not take long for her to discover that this fresh bout of disquietude was brought about by Cameron's return.

Elizabeth, of course, would never have told Angela this but for the serious consequences of the most recent entanglement. "I'm pregnant," Liz told Angela. She did not have to ask by whom, because she knew that Dustin would never have been that irresponsible. A quiet anger took hold of Angela upon hearing this news. She wasn't sure if she could weather this particular betrayal, for she had come to hate Cameron with a passion, and Angela did not use the word, *hate* any more lightly than she used the word *love*. On the other hand, Elizabeth seemed to *need* her now, to require support and emotional sustenance from her. So Angela stood by idly, trying to provide whatever was asked of her, which was largely just a reliable shoulder to cry on and a reassuring voice that could convince Liz that everything would be okay. After a couple of weeks, she was completely alarmed when Elizabeth considered actually having the baby. Angela thought that was absolute insanity; Liz was only twenty-one, and she was about to graduate with what would likely be the first of multiple degrees. Liz was also fairly irresponsible about finances, had no real-world experience of employment outside retail and her brief stint at Angela's workplace, and could not even find the wherewithal to do her own laundry most weeks. In the end, though, the situation resolved itself. Elizabeth had abandoned the idea of having the baby, which Angela suspected was largely the result of her mother's intervention, and had scheduled an abortion. But while waiting for that appointment, she had a miscarriage.

* * * *

When Angela was a child, she learned that there was something wrong with her mother, though she could not put a

name to it then. Her mother had a particular look that Angela knew meant she should stay away from her. It was a look of unhappiness and despair, of a constant melancholy. Angela's father could not explain it. When a child has a parent with this facial expression, she learns to approach that parent tentatively, haltingly, on guard for any reprisal for daring to need affection, encouragement, guidance.

As she grew older, some of her friends had parents who were separated and some divorced. When Angela talked to these friends and they told her how they felt abandoned by one parent or another, the word struck a chord with veritable force. But she could not understand this feeling of empathy she had with her teenage friends, because her own parents were neither separated nor divorced. They did not even argue loudly, as some of her friends' parents had. As far as Angela knew, her parents never disagreed at all.

One day, one of Angela's friends described their father as distant, and Angela thought, "Yes, distant. Distant is the word that describes my mother." She began to add other words to her vocabulary when describing her mother: cold, removed, inaccessible, unapproachable. She faced difficulty when trying to reconcile these terms with her mother, because her mother had said things like, "You can always talk to me. You can become anything you want to be. We are your parents, and we are here for you." But often it seemed as if Angela's mother said these things because she believed, or had heard from other mothers, that these were the things she was supposed to say, that doing so would ensure a proper upbringing and a well-adjusted, successful, normal child. So Angela did not believe her mother when she spoke these words because there did not appear to be any evidence to fortify those claims. She did not feel supported and she certainly did not feel like she could discuss anything with her mother or her father.

As she grew, Angela developed a complicated and often volatile relationship with her mother. She seemed to be close to her father, but she never felt truly understood by either parent, and into her adult years believed that she had been nothing but a

disappointment to them. Through therapy she tried to learn to convince herself that she did not need their approval, only her own, but she was not able to fully believe this despite her best efforts.

When Angela was still with Dawn, her parents came to visit them. On a day trip to a street festival, Angela and her mother were looking at clothing on a rack outside an upscale shop. At one point, Angela turned to say something to her mother, but her mother had moved on to another shop. When she caught up with her, she half-jokingly said, “I panicked for a moment because I turned and you were gone, I didn’t know where you went.” Her mother gave her a questioning look and Angela said, “I have abandonment issues.” But this, too, she said jokingly. Her mother responded, “Why would you have those? I never abandoned you.”

In that moment, Angela knew that her mother would never have any comprehension at all of the kind of mother she had been. She would never know the scars that she had inflicted or the faulty core beliefs that she instilled when Angela was at her most impressionable. In a way, her mother was actually right, because to have abandoned her, she would have had to have been present in the first place.

* * * *

When Elizabeth graduated and moved back home, Angela was actually quite all right for a little while. They spoke on the phone a few times a week, they emailed every day, and Elizabeth kept her informed of her job search, family happenings, and future career plans she was considering. She came to visit right away, after about three weeks. She planned to stay with Dustin, of course. But when Angela met them at a bar with some of their college friends, she slipped a small plastic package into the pocket of Elizabeth’s jeans and whispered in her ear, “You might want to consider where you’re sleeping since you’ll need someone to talk to when you’re still awake at three A.M.”

They made love that night, and when Angela got up the next morning, she wanted to do something nice for Liz, *and* for

Dustin, since she had stolen Liz away from him her first night visiting. So she picked him up and the two of them bought breakfast to take back to Angela's place. Elizabeth was sleeping naked, but Angela sent Dustin in to wake her, assuming that things were the way they had always been. When Angela looked through the bedroom door, Liz was covering herself up, looking over Dustin's shoulder at Angela and glaring, as if to say, "I didn't want him to know." Surely when Liz went home with Angela, Dustin knew what went on? Angela was confused but decided not to ask questions.

That was the only one of the three nights that Elizabeth was in town that she stayed with Angela. On the third night, another night of drinking in bars with college kids and smoking pot on the balcony outside Dustin's apartment, Angela felt compelled to drive and ruminate. She tucked Elizabeth into Dustin's bed, kissed her on the cheek, and left at about 3:30 in the morning. Once in a great while, this would happen: Angela would get into her car, check the gas gauge and her cigarette supply, point the car westward, and just go. On these drives she often thought the most clearly about her life, her reality, her feelings. Angela could vividly imagine that her mind and the road beneath her wheels were one entity, that as she traveled and transversed, she was heading toward some kind of conclusion or solution. For or to what, she did not know. She would pull over to the side of the road and watch the sun slowly rise over the fields, or mountains, depending on how far she'd gotten. Often, she would spend this time seriously considering becoming one of those people that one would hear about on the news, or an episode of *Unsolved Mysteries*, someone that simply vanished. She thought to just keep driving, across the country, across state lines, across the border to Mexico. She thought of developing a new identity and bartending in a little taberna, making just enough money to rent a room and have groceries and spend endless hours on the beach and in the ocean. She had never told anyone, not even Elizabeth, about these excursions. Invariably, Angela did not have the courage, and she would eventually stop for a strong cup of gas-station coffee and head

back to her life.

Later that day, Elizabeth came to Angela's apartment and kissed her goodbye, but there was something in that kiss that Angela could feel, something that got stuck in her throat and tasted like abandonment. She would not see Elizabeth again for a long time. Her westward drive had brought things into crisper focus. Angela understood that this was the nature of their connection now: they would be intensely emotionally involved, or they would have no contact at all. A cycle had been put into motion that could not be stopped, the relationship of a constantly changing landscape with their unhealthy attachment to each other's chaos and pain always at the center.

Chapter 7

The next time they found themselves speaking on the phone, Angela knew that Elizabeth was dating and doing whatever else it was she wanted to do. She did not know whether Dustin was still in the picture once he'd also graduated and moved back home. Angela had recognized by this time that whenever they reconnected, the tighter she tried to hold onto Elizabeth, the farther away Liz went, so Angela began to go to great lengths to distract herself. She was resolved not to just sit around and pine. At least, she was determined not to do that *all* of the time. She went back to the strip club to fuel a different, more benign fantasy that didn't carry the same amount of risk; at least with Jennifer she knew what to expect and she could count on her ego being stroked. Intentionally getting lost in this alternate reverie, she could quiet the raging fear that Elizabeth would one day decide to abandon her and *never* come back, that there was a finite number of separations and reunions that they could withstand.

Angela dedicated more time to getting high. She had begun to suspect that Carol was cutting her bags of crank, misrepresenting their weight or worth, because they had lost their effect. It never occurred to Angela that she had built up a tolerance. Carol no longer worked where Angela worked, so they no longer saw each other every day. This made room for Angela's suspicions to grow and caused a rift in the friendship. The rift became a rupture when Carol, who had introduced her to crank and encouraged the love affair, tried to tell Angela that she was using too much, too often. Without regret or remorse, Angela ceased contacting her. A person who had actually been a good friend to her in some regards, simply tossed aside. Instead, Angela went in search of new suppliers who would operate on a simple exchange, cash for product, without the complications or intimacies of friendship. This search took Angela from crank to crystal meth, which Angela loved even more—it was cheaper, and its effects seemed to last longer. With this new drug she again achieved a modicum of (temporary) peace.

Although the phone calls with Elizabeth became more sporadic over time, the nature of them changed. Being permanently separated by distance was still new territory, and Angela was, for the first time in love, learning the complicated art of letting go, at least a little. Since Elizabeth was now only a disembodied voice on the phone—nothing to see, no skin to touch—Angela had been ever so slightly released from the spell that Liz cast with her physical presence. A spark of honesty and authenticity began to slowly weave its way into their conversations. Although unacknowledged by either of them, it was almost as if they both knew that this geographic expanse *could* be the perfect excuse to cut ties completely, but they were both afraid of what they might become without each other.

Because Angela had genuine love for Elizabeth, there was often a baffling war taking place within her; her love was (and would always be) swirled together with desire, lust, friendship, true intimacy, fear, conflict, and self-preservation. Angela believed that she could will herself to feel one way or another, that if she tried hard enough she could be “only” a friend or “only” a lover or only an occasional confidante in order to give Elizabeth what she needed in any particular moment or circumstance. It would take years for Angela to understand that she could not mold her feelings to fit some situation or another, that she could not make herself stop feeling the things that she felt, not want the things that she wanted. She could not do this anymore than Elizabeth could, but Angela never even considered this, assuming that whatever was wrong in their relationship in any given circumstance was, by default, the result of her own shortcomings.

Angela did her best to mask her jealousy when Elizabeth began telling her of an entirely new stable of lovers. She listened to Elizabeth become excited in the beginning stages of some new intrigue, only to be disappointed shortly thereafter when these men (for there were no other women then) became attached to her, began to pursue her, wanted more than something casual. With each passing name (Jim, Paul, Eric, Dan, Tony) Angela became less and less concerned. They were

faceless, meaningless, their only importance being further proof that Elizabeth was quite incapable of commitment or intimacy with men. And, though Angela knew she would never be able to glean fidelity from Elizabeth, she was fairly certain that she did receive a level of emotional honesty, that she was also the only person with whom Elizabeth shared this. Angela's need to be *with* Elizabeth began to be replaced with the need to be *special* to her. Dustin had been special, (she wasn't sure if he still was, for Liz had not mentioned him in some time), but he was still a man among many men.

So Angela listened. With time she began to also hear small slivers of what Elizabeth was not saying. She began to understand some of her inner workings, her seeming coldness in some areas and well-disguised fragility in others. They began to mutually share fears and secrets, continually passing each other on a two-lane highway rather than traveling at high velocity on a one-way street with no outlet. Angela began telling Elizabeth things that she had never told anyone, opening herself in a way that she had not before, that she had not known she was capable. She had believed that it was in the early days surrounded by the chaos and drama of the Dawn-Liz-Angela scenario that she had fallen in love with Elizabeth. But she was mistaken. It was during this time, these phone calls, with geographic, physical distance between them that allowed each of them to be themselves (as much as they were capable) and to at least partially bare their souls without feeling exposed in each other's stares. Angela had not fallen in love in direct contact, not really. Instead, it had happened slowly, over electrical wires and telephone cables. Falling is like this, like breathing, an opening and closing that happens without anyone noticing.

Because Angela was still using drugs and alcohol, she could not always trust herself to know what was real and what was not. But in these spontaneous phone calls that sometimes lasted deep into the night, Angela could swear that whatever it was that she shared with Elizabeth, this situation that would always hover somewhere between romantic partnership and profound friendship, actually had depth and trust and roots that

had taken a firm hold. Still, these roots were delicate, easily eviscerated. They were often disturbed too soon or left in the soil too late. Only with patience, gentleness, and practice would Angela and Elizabeth learn to replant their garden a little more skillfully each time.

Angela's answering machine light was blinking when she came home from work. She knew instinctively that it was Elizabeth, but she wondered why she had called her home phone when she well knew that Angela would be at work. Curious, she didn't even take off her coat before walking over and hitting the Play Messages button.

"Hi. It's me. So, I tried to kill myself and have been in the hospital for the past couple of days…" and the message went on for a few more seconds in the same flat, emotionless, matter-of-fact tone.

Angela's knees gave out and she sank to the floor. Her last line of meth had been several hours ago (she was trying to cut back) and she was mostly sober; feelings rushed in like floodwaters. She was distraught, shocked, sad, baffled, angry. How could Elizabeth do this? *Why* would she do this? Why would Angela have no idea, why hadn't Liz reached out to her for help if she were in such despair? The last time they had spoken on the phone, Elizabeth had seemed in good spirits. Angela knew that Liz was prone to bouts of melancholy just as Angela herself was, but she didn't actively worry about this. Her thoughts swirled, and she began to feel foolish. Why did she trust that Elizabeth was telling her everything that was happening in her life, in her heart? *Of course* she withheld things. She'd withheld things as long as they'd known each other. They both kept their most insidious darkness from one another, revealing only what they believed the other would find acceptable. Their honesty with each other, no matter how well-intentioned, was not limitless.

Angela called Elizabeth's apartment. Answering machine. She tried again, multiple times in rapid succession, listening to her voice on the outgoing message, and she began to weep. She tried Elizabeth's parents' house and was startled when Marian, Liz's mother, answered the phone. Angela had met

Marian a handful of times and never got the impression that she approved of Liz's relationship with Angela, regardless of the current mode. Angela asked if Elizabeth was okay. Marian was curt but said that, yes, she was fine. But she would not let Angela speak to her. "She needs to rest. I don't think she needs to talk to anyone right now." Which Angela thought really meant, "I don't think she needs to talk to *you*." But Marian was obviously wrong. She could not possibly understand the connection between them. If Elizabeth needed to talk to anyone, it was Angela, because Angela understood her. Or did she? This alarming news, delivered via answering machine, seemed to conclude otherwise.

* * * *

When Angela was twenty-two, her girlfriend, Emily, swallowed a fistful of pills in a suicide attempt. Angela was the one who had rushed her to the emergency room and had been forced to make the call to Emily's mother. Angela was told nothing after they whisked her girlfriend away, and she was not permitted to see her even after she was stabilized because Angela was not immediate family.

After the initial panic had subsided, Angela considered what had happened in light of her own attempt a few years earlier. She, too, had taken pills and had even been taken to the very same hospital in which she now sat. While she waited for members of Emily's family to arrive, she wondered if Emily had also only done this as a 'cry for help,' as a psychiatrist would say. Angela thought that was probably true. One thing Angela knew, and thought could have been a mitigating factor in this drama, was that Emily was having an affair. Angela was unsure exactly when or how this had happened, only that she had treated Emily like a queen, that they had once been happy, that Emily had loved her more and better than anyone before her. And now she did not.

Later, when Angela was allowed to see her, Emily's mom and sisters went to the cafeteria and left Angela alone with

Emily. Angela lingered a moment by the edge of the hospital bed. Emily was sitting up, knees drawn up under her chin, she looked aloof, distant, angry. Angela tucked Emily's hair back behind her ear and touched her face. Her hospital gown was stained with charcoal and her face was streaked with dried tears. The way Emily looked at Angela wounded her deeply, she glared at her as if she were the last person on earth she wanted to see. She said only, "Can we go home?"

Not long after this, the relationship ended, the affair finally exposed. Later, Angela was even more baffled by the failure of the relationship because she found out that the woman Emily had cheated with had begun physically abusing her. Angela did not know yet that, largely, people are products of their environment and are most comfortable with what is familiar, even when it is painful. Which is why Angela took Emily back twice before the relationship was over for good.

* * * *

Elizabeth came to visit Angela when she was "better." Angela had not been able to extract too much information from her about the why of what she had done. Elizabeth had only said that she was unhappy, that she had been trapped in self-loathing, disappointed in herself and the life choices she had made, particularly in terms of romantic and sexual relationships. (Were they not one in the same?) She had been engaging compulsively in random sex with strangers and others, like Cameron (who Angela now knew was also near Liz geographically) and Dustin. She had no idea what she wanted to do with her life professionally or academically; she felt lost and alone. What better way to resolve these conflicts than taking a road trip to see her most trusted confidante, her angel of mercy, the one person who Elizabeth knew would always love her, no matter what she did or did not do.

She came for a weekend. Angela had been experimenting with periods of being clean and sober, not because she had any desire to permanently abstain, but because she had come to

believe that these periods were necessary for her to think straight, to see clearly, to get her bearings in her own life and see where it might be headed. In reality, both Angela and Elizabeth were in the same place emotionally: confused, empty, and seeking meaning and direction. It would seem to both of them, over time, that the only way either could really sort through their feelings about themselves and their own worlds was by seeking refuge in the other.

The first night that Elizabeth was with Angela, they stayed up late into the night talking on the couch. Elizabeth said that she needed to find herself, and in order to do so she felt like she needed to abstain from partnerships of any kind, one-night sexual liaisons, ongoing emotional tugs-of-war, and everything in between. Angela presumed she was excluded from this abstinence, since, after all, Elizabeth was with her right now in her apartment, on her couch, pouring out her innermost thoughts and struggles with a vulnerability that Angela did not think anyone else got to see, at least not for long, and not more than once.

Exhausted from the turmoil, Elizabeth collapsed into a shaking, sobbing, almost wailing mess. Angela drew a deep, cathartic, completely sober breath and waited. Sometimes, when Liz was emotional, she shunned physical contact, did not want to be held or comforted, which left Angela feeling helpless and adrift. In this instance, however, Elizabeth reached for her. Angela wrapped her up tightly in her arms, whispering encouraging words, assurances that this would pass, that soon everything would be all right. Elizabeth cried for a long time that night, so long that parts of Angela's body had fallen asleep in her awkward position, pins and needles had settled in, and her neck was craned at an angle that eventually began to throb with pain. Still, she did not move, did not adjust herself in any way, other than to, from time to time, switch which hand she was using to stroke Elizabeth's hair and wipe away her tears.

The remainder of their weekend was subdued. They slept late, watched movies, went out to lunch, drank wine. They went to the park, they visited the apple orchard, they cooked dinner together. They slept intertwined or near each other, they were

affectionate. They did not have sex. They did not talk about the status of their relationship or their futures. They were only ever presently together in a way that they had not been before. Angela began to think that perhaps they were finally *really* together, that this is what their union would look like until the end of their days. Until Sunday night arrived reluctantly, and Elizabeth got in her car and drove home. As Angela watched her drive away, this time she did not know that the red taillights disappearing in the dusk were the beginning of the next interruption of the circuitry of their connection.

Chapter 8

The silence was slowly killing Angela; there was so much silence in those days. She had not heard from Elizabeth in months, and with each new week that melted into the next, Angela began to suspect that they were finished. In the beginning of the new round of unresponsiveness, she hadn't worried, since Elizabeth had done this many times before. But this particular time no number of begging or pleading or sobbing voicemails elicited a response. Not long after her last visit, Liz told Angela over the phone that she had meant it as a goodbye, that she really did intend to impose a moratorium on any and all relationships. She said that she could not summon the ability to do this in person although she had intended to. She explained, "I don't know what happens to me Ange, but when I'm in your physical presence, it's like a particular pheromone causes an actual chemical change that renders me unable to feel anything but love, because, you know, I *do* love you. But then I felt it dissipate as I drove away that day and wept."

Angela didn't even know where Elizabeth was living by now. She had mentioned during that last visit that there were already plans in place to move into a rental in the city. She had responded to an advertisement for a roommate. Elizabeth's move to a new location coincided with her uncommunicativeness, presumably by design.

When Angela had gathered a little money, she went back to the strip club again because there was no silence there. Angela had set her sights on someone new, Terry—a different dancer she had started spending time with long before, when Jennifer was either absent or very unavailable. The night Angela went back, she desperately hoped that Terry would offer respite from the blackness, the void that Elizabeth had left behind.

The very first time Angela had a dance from Terry, she had convinced her that she was a victim of circumstance, broken by her relationship with Elizabeth, lonely to a point just shy of tragic. She did not tell Terry about her unrealistic expectations, her complete refusal to acknowledge certain truths about said

relationship, or that she had ever been anything other than an innocent actor in the whole affair. She also, of course, did not tell Terry about her drug use or alcoholism.

Unlike Jennifer, Terry was not particularly adept at professional versus personal boundaries. It was a completely ordinary occurrence for her to hang out with, befriend, or even date people she initially met as customers. So not long after the night Angela went seeking refuge from the silence, she and Terry struck up an impassioned friendship outside of the club, and Angela set about making herself emotionally indispensable. In Terry, Angela had found another woman who was utterly willing to engage in a level of physical affection totally inappropriate for a lesbian and bisexual woman who were supposed to be 'just friends.' For hours, they would lie in bed together and cuddle and talk. Angela had come to believe that if she could get a woman to fulfill her emotional needs, having a sexual component was not entirely necessary. As long as she was *special* in some way, it did not really matter which way that was.

Just as Angela and Terry were establishing more or less of a routine, and Angela was adjusting into settling for what she could get, Terry announced that she was moving away with her boyfriend Ron. Angela was crushed. This did afford her, however, a new dramatic spin. So she added regular phone calls and emails lamenting their distance to her manipulation repertoire and found new and creative ways to keep Terry engaged. Angela made it a point to make Terry worry even more than she normally did, for Terry had come to suspect Angela's addictions only a couple of weeks into their relationship. Angela would intentionally disappear from the radar for brief periods, only to return and weep uncontrollably on the phone, telling Terry she missed her and didn't know how she could possibly survive without her. Angela actually partially believed this, she so desperately wanted Terry to be the fix she needed to end her suffering, her self-destruction.

After a particularly harrowing three-day run and a near overdose, Angela decided it was time to go see Terry, to profess her undying love and need for her once and for all. Elizabeth was

obviously not coming back, so Angela wanted to shackle herself to another, even if that other lacked Elizabeth's magical qualities. No one would ever compare, but Angela decided she would settle, just as she had settled her whole life for partners with whom she did not belong.

She scored drugs for the road, called and increased the limit on her credit card, booked a hotel for one night, and was on her way. In Angela's now full-blown delusions, she honestly believed that if she could get Terry to love her enough, she could change the sorry excuse for a life she was living and turn things around. Angela convinced herself that, for Terry, she could quit everything she was doing, and only for her. But that weekend did not at all go as planned.

Angela drove nearly two hundred miles to remain 'just friends.' Their hours together passed very much as they always had. Terry refused Angela's invitation to spend the night with her at her hotel. Angela's drugs ran out by morning, and her exterior began to crack. She had not slept, and she had wept so much her eyes were nearly swollen shut. They went to breakfast and said very few words. Before Angela got in her car and drove away, Terry kissed her on the cheek and her eyes filled with tears. She looked into Angela's eyes with a profound sadness and said, "I love you so much, but I can't help you. I am afraid for you, I'm afraid that you are going to die. Please, please, get some help."

* * * *

The screaming silence had returned after that. Angela had been increasingly alone, devoid of human contact. Even her coworkers looked at her askance, as if her pain and sorrow were a communicable illness. She had recently been demoted, after two separate meetings with her superiors during which they discussed her troubling absences and tardiness and a continued decline in her performance. Angela found it remarkable this had not happened sooner; she had been 'declining' for at least a year. She knew that this demotion, this decrease in hours and responsibility, was going to be her last chance. Still, she could

not bring herself to muster the enthusiasm to attempt change, to even care. Angela had been using methamphetamines for so long now that she could not function without them, and her finances were such and her addiction was such that she could not maintain a steady stream of what was required to live a life with any sort of purpose. Every day it was an effort just to get out of bed. In the evenings, and every weekend, if she did not procure drugs, she did nothing but sleep, occasionally eat junk food, and watch rented movies. All of her relationships had fallen away. Even those she once considered close friends stopped attempting to maintain a connection; they had become exhausted by Angela's refusal to admit that anything was wrong at all, let alone that she had clearly developed a "drug problem."

There was the deafening silence of night as well, it was always worse at night. Knowing that her condition was self-imposed did not ease its unbearableness. Angela thought that her brain was actually devoid of sound, that there was just a murmur of wind in a tunnel. She could not even hear the noise her blood usually made when she covered her ears hard, as if her veins and arteries had stopped working, stopped pumping her various fluids where they needed to go. She began to suspect that she was no longer alive, that what she experienced each day was an incredibly vivid dream and she was just waiting for someone or something to tell her that she was actually dead, just wandering the earth aimlessly until whatever came next.

* * * *

When Angela was about ten years old, she stole two Michelobs from the mini fridge behind her father's bar in the furnished basement of the house she grew up in, and she drank them with her childhood friend Donna. She would remember this moment for the rest of her life, because she believed it was when the modifications to her psyche began. Before that day, she had been a happy child. And, perhaps, she had been a happy child for a long time after that, but some spore had begun to erupt in her that day, spawning other mechanisms that would rage

forward through the years, playing themselves out in her thoughts and actions.

When she was between the ages of eleven and thirteen, she learned that alcohol would soothe the sting of rejection, both from the boys she knew she was supposed to like but didn't and the girls she knew she wasn't but did. Around twelve, she was at a birthday party and the boy named George, who all the girls liked, danced with her. She felt special in the way that only young girls can feel. They played Seven Minutes in Heaven, and nothing happened until the very end, when he kissed her on the cheek. Later, when she was in the bathroom, she heard him tell another girl that he had danced with Angela because he felt sorry for her. She went home that day and drank a shot glass full of vodka for the first time. She did not care about George after that.

When she was fourteen, she smoked her first joint. She learned quickly that marijuana enabled her to be comfortable enough in her own body to sexually engage with men. When she learned how to do that, she felt less rejected, yes, but she began to hate herself more. When she found Joanne, she began to hate herself less because there was someone else who wanted to be with girls the way that she did. But, a couple years later, when Jo kept abandoning Angela for Betsy, the self-loathing returned. Angela knew there must be something wrong with her, because she wasn't as good as Betsy, or as pretty. But she discovered that if she drank more and hung around with her pot-smoking friends more, she cared less about Jo and Betsy.

When she was twenty-one, she discovered that she could use sex the same way she used substances; if the sex was good enough, the orgasm overwhelming enough, it would soothe the aches and pains of living. After the incident with Emily's suicide attempt and the cheating, Angela started taking home or going home with strange women from the bars she frequented.

Year by year, substance by substance, incident by incident, addiction grows and reproduces. However, the attribute that outlasts addiction, that takes infinitely longer to cure is the disease of self-hatred, exemplified in each and every example of the insatiable drive for self-harm.

Part 3

If two people love each other, there can be no happy end to it.
—Ernest Hemingway, *Death in the Afternoon*

Chapter 9

What came next was Angela getting sober. Many other things happened to Angela before she crashed into her rock bottom and survived the physical withdrawal, but mostly what she needed as a catalyst was to land at the bottom of the emotional abyss. People who get clean and sober do so on only one condition; when standing at the precipice of complete destruction or change, they choose change. Some choose because of religious conviction, some because the law has demanded sobriety of them, others because they do not wish to harm their families any longer. Angela did not know why she chose change. She had none of those reasons. She thought it might have been just the simplicity of the choice between change or death. She knew only that in her darkest hour, during a visit from a faraway friend, Sarah, she handed Sarah the last of her drugs and said, “Take this from me. And no matter what I say, don’t give it back.” To Angela’s shock, she did not ask Sarah to give the drugs back to her. Not later that night. Not the next morning. By the time she asked about them, Sarah had already unceremoniously flushed them down the toilet.

Not only did Angela *get* sober, she *stayed* sober. First for days, then weeks, then months. (Eventually, she would have years.) She had two new part-time jobs to replace the full-time job she had finally lost after exhausting the patience of her benevolent employer. She declared bankruptcy to settle all outstanding debts. Piece by piece, she reclaimed her life. Embracing the finer nuances of twelve-step recovery, she set about a rigorous course of repairing herself internally, through external counseling and developing her personal version of a ‘spiritual journey’. If discovering a surviving thread of self-worth and a desire to live wasn’t a literal miracle, Angela didn’t know

what was. She found it difficult to describe what it was like to be not sober one day and sober the next, knowing that words were as ill-equipped to describe recovery as they had been to describe love. It was akin to wandering through a forest; a dense, dark, aromatic forest. She had grown accustomed to both the terrors and joys of said forest, but one day stumbled out of the trees and into a clearing, and the clearing was filled with people she did not know but felt an instantaneous link to. What 'the program' called 'fellowship' (a term Angela detested for its religious connotations) was a bright spot early on, because no one craved connection more than she. As she settled into this new life, she could almost see hope as a material thing, like an apparition walking gently through the shadows, stalking her.

Part of any twelve-step program is the process of making amends, and when it came time for Angela to make hers, she, of course, wrote a letter to Elizabeth. The letter was written and rewritten a dozen times and read over by Angela's sponsor a dozen more. The point of all this scrutiny was to ensure that Angela's motives were pure, that her purpose was only to apologize for any harm she felt she had inflicted upon Elizabeth, particularly during periods under the heavy influence of drugs and alcohol. Angela was not supposed to mention, or even consider, any harm that she felt she had suffered at Elizabeth's hand. "Ninth steps," as they are called, are supposed to be about owning your part in situations, particularly painful ones, and about changing one's own behavior. To make such amends and expect anything in return is not the point. She absolutely was expected to be able to say what she felt she needed to say, and then leave it alone, like tossing a coin into a fountain.

So with the blessing of her most trusted new confidantes, she emailed the letter. Angela had no idea if the email address she had for Elizabeth was even still valid. Angela believed her intentions were good, and her motives were pure, but some ferocious little thing, a feral secret, kicked her in the gut from the inside the moment she hit Send. Angela could not decide which prospect terrified her more; to hear from Elizabeth or not to. Both carried a palpable amount of emotional risk.

Now Angela was frantically obsessing about a response. She thought of little else but told no one. She missed Elizabeth more than she had missed any of her unrealistic attachments, more than any of her old friends, she even missed her more than drugs and alcohol. With nearly six months sober, Angela felt clear headed, physically well, and even relatively content, taking long-forgotten pleasure in simple things like reading. She felt a sense of hopefulness that she had either never had, or had so long ago she could barely recall what it felt like. Getting sober *is* a bit like being a newborn; every day there are new things to experience in an extraordinarily sensory way, not realizing what had been missing before. Still, there was an absence that could not be filled, and though of course she had missed Elizabeth before she got sober, now she could overwhelmingly *feel* the act of missing. Elizabeth was like a hushed and haunting melody that Angela was always humming to herself when she was alone. Flashes of memories would erupt without warning, sometimes so violently Angela would shudder. Other times the process of memory was gentle, like watching images float by in a stream.

Retrospection and regret had morphed into an imaginative mirage for Angela long ago. After the second or third or fifth or thirtieth time that Elizabeth had dashed Angela's hopes, she awoke one night to a scratching sound. She squinted in the shadows and saw the faint outline of what looked like a small black crow climbing slowly up the white brick walls of her bedroom. Not climbing exactly, more like gliding, perfectly perpendicular to the wall. Angela actually liked birds, but this crow looked almost vicious, vile, evil, terrifying. It turned its head and looked at her with beady black eyes, then vanished. Initially Angela dismissed this as her imagination, surely that was it, she wasn't *mad* after all.

At first the crow seemed to be confined to Angela's apartment, but once in a while she could feel it looking at her when she was elsewhere, particularly when she was somewhere wishing Liz were there—at a movie or a play or watching a band with her friends. From what Angela could tell, the crow's purpose was to remind her it was her fault Elizabeth had gone away. It whispered

things to her, though the voice didn't seem to come from its beak, but rather seeped into Angela's brain through telepathy.

"You're weak, she needs someone strong. You're afraid, she needs someone fearless.

You are not good enough for her. You are not pretty enough, thin enough, smart enough. She does not love you. She never loved you."

Angela had never told anyone about the crow, afraid they would ship her off to the locked ward if she had. In time she had all but forgotten the malicious blackbird of sorrow, but that first night after her ninth step email, the crow returned.

* * * *

Angela was angry and resentful when her sober friends or her sponsor had suggested that Elizabeth had been no different than a drug to Angela. They made this comparison matter-of-factly. She understood what they meant, and that they were genuine in their concern for her, because Angela's relationship with Liz *had* been, at times, addictive, destructive, painful, and difficult to give up. But they were oversimplifying things, of course. They could not possibly understand the life force that bound the two women, the covenant that they had made long ago, how their shared experiences and traumas fixed them to each other. The crux of Angela's dilemma was that she did not really know how to *be* Angela without Elizabeth.

After four days, Angela opened her email and found Elizabeth's name in her inbox. She froze. Her heart beat wildly in her chest. She thought she should perhaps call her sponsor or a friend to be with her before she read the message then immediately dismissed that idea. She could see the crow's dark wings flapping slowly and silently in the corner of the room, but she dared not look at it.

She stood up at her desk in the spare room in her apartment so violently fast the chair went clattering across the floor. Walking out into the kitchen, she gulped a glass of water, and for several minutes Angela just stood at the sink, welcoming the old sensation

of anguish combined with ecstasy that had laid dormant since their last contact. Now it was here, as fresh and exhilarating and wonderfully excruciating as it had always been. She waited for the heat in her blood and the shouting in her head (her own voice? The crow?) to subside, then walked back into the spare room, set right the chair, lit a cigarette, and opened the email.

She read and re-read Elizabeth's words several times, searching for clues, digging between the lines, tearing sentences apart into individual words in a ravenous attempt to uncover any semblance of affection, of desire, of love. She gently touched the computer screen, the way she would touch a wall of glass if Liz had been looking at her from the other side. Elizabeth's tone was kind but with a discernible, measured distance. Angela imagined that Liz had spent a great deal of time choosing her words, that she was guarded and wary, that she wanted to crack open the door between them and peek through, not throw it open with abandon. Angela imagined her hands poised above the keyboard, thinking, thinking, how will this be interpreted? How do I *want* this to be interpreted?

In her letter, Elizabeth reminded Angela that when she was an undergraduate, she had written an extensive paper on David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*, critiquing the theme of twelve-step recovery as a viable path to healing as a major narrative throughout the text. That was to say that, yes, she had a keen understanding of what a ninth step was all about and what Angela was trying to accomplish. She also said she had been gravely concerned about Angela the last time they had spoken, as it had been obvious, even on the phone, that she was not doing well. "Yet you made no attempt to help me," Angela said aloud to the empty room (to the crow). Elizabeth said that, in any case, she was glad to hear of Angela's sobriety, she harbored no ill will toward her, and Angela need not feel bad about anything concerning her. Angela's apologies were wholeheartedly accepted, and she wished Angela all the best. Elizabeth had *not* said, "Don't contact me again."

Angela could not even remember the last time they had spoken, let alone what she might have said. She was vaguely

aware there had been times when she had telephoned Liz while intoxicated and could have said just about anything, though she suspected mostly she just begged her to come back. By the time those conversations had happened, she understood Elizabeth had stubbornly kept her promise to cut ties with any person who so much as vaguely resembled anything other than a strictly platonic acquaintance. Angela did not know how long her moratorium had lasted, she only knew that Liz must be with someone (or several someones) now, perhaps even someone who sat idly by watching TV or reading a book while she had painstakingly drafted her response.

Still, Angela knew it would take time for her to arrive at any real possibility with Elizabeth again. (For she had decided that this was what would happen, there was no room in her heart for any other possibility.) She needed to re-establish a friendship, and she needed to regain Elizabeth's trust and openness to intimacy. Not once did it occur to Angela that she would also need time to develop these things herself, that Elizabeth had trust to regain as well. Any notion that forging a renewed connection would ultimately lead to more pain, more disappointment, more failed expectations, Angela dismissed immediately. From the moment she read *Dear Angela* on the computer screen, a partition went up inside Angela's mind that walled off any painful memories or negative feelings of any kind from rational thought. Angela knew on some level this was happening: tiny construction workers were using tiny hydraulic lifts to securely position this structure inside her brain.

For Elizabeth to become reinvested and comfortable, Angela would need to use her newly found coping skill of patience. So, while she waited, she went after Terry, expertly compartmentalizing each experience: wait for Liz, pursue someone else. The day after Angela had sent her letter to Elizabeth, she made her amends to Terry in person; Terry had left Ron and moved back into town (conveniently for Angela). Angela ruminated on the idea of being in a romantic relationship with Terry and considered the possibility that if she could find the capacity to love someone else, and someone else could love

her, she could then stop loving Elizabeth. The truth was, if Angela had found someone, even someone who reminded her of Liz, being with someone else was never going to be the solution, was never going to be the way that Angela could become Angela without Liz. To do that she must be free, and Angela was not ready to be free. The thought of not being enslaved by love filled her with terror. She imagined herself floating away into the atmosphere were she no longer tethered to the planet by the central fact of her life, her longing for Elizabeth.

Chapter 10

Angela had made her amends to Terry honestly, for she recognized that Terry's severing of ties had been the first nudge toward Angela's sobriety. No one else had confronted her so directly. Of course, Angela assigned meaning to that caring and had decided that the meaning of this selfless compassion was that Terry had a soft spot for Angela in her heart, and that soft spot was something that Angela could manipulate.

Terry and Angela picked up their friendship very much where they had left it, complete with emotional and physical intimacy, the subtext of Angela's desire just below the surface. To prevent herself from making overtures toward Terry too soon, Angela kept repeating a sort of mantra to herself about Shane, Terry's new man du jour. Terry had never been alone for very long, and Angela suspected that Shane was another customer-turned-boyfriend. Besides, he was the rebound, so Angela doubted that Shane was in any way sustainable. She curled like a poisonous viper in the corner of Terry's life, waiting for the opportunity to infect, to overcome Terry with ardor that could not be resisted.

Two days after Elizabeth's response and five days after Terry and Angela were again friends, Terry and Angela had plans to meet their friend Joe for dinner. Terry had come to Angela's apartment, had gone inside and used the bathroom, had hugged Angela, and stood waiting while she put her sneakers on. They walked through the apartment door and just as their feet hit the first step, Angela noticed a tiny stain on her sweatshirt, and even though Terry said, "Oh come on. You can barely see that," Angela went back inside her basement apartment and changed. Had she not noticed that tiny stain and not been self-conscious enough to want to change clothes, what happened next might not have, and the future of Angela and Elizabeth might just have unfolded in a very different manner. But she had and she had been and it did.

Angela locked her door on her way back out and walked up the five steps from the basement apartment to the ground level.

She opened the interior heavy door and saw a hand on the latch of the opposite side of the exterior screen door. When Angela's gaze moved from the fingers to the hand to the arm to the shoulder and finally to the head of the person entering, she found herself staring into Elizabeth's face on the other side of the screen.

No one said anything or moved, trapped in the amber of the moment. Angela feared she might double over and fall backward down the stairs or faint or both. Terry was behind Elizabeth and reached across her to yank the screen door open and shove past. She reached out to steady Angela just as Angela turned her head slightly to look back at her. She was already taking Angela's keys out of her hand. She had never met Elizabeth, but she had seen the photos Angela kept around. Angela could feel Terry's recognition in the moment. Angela went through the door to the outside, and Terry disappeared back into Angela's apartment.

Angela and Elizabeth stood facing each other on the gravel parking lot. For Angela, the scene was slow motion, a hazy gauze filter on the edges of her vision. Elizabeth said, "Hi." Angela said "Hi," and took a step toward her. Elizabeth reflexively stepped back, and for a split-second Angela thought, *She's afraid of me* and was immediately crushed by this. Had she really been so terrible that she instilled fear? Perhaps it wasn't that, exactly. Perhaps instead it was just the prospect of an embrace that would be laden with overtones and meaning that Elizabeth feared. Surely that was it, not fear of physical violence, but physical *love*.

Angela slowly asked, "What are you doing here?"

"I just thought…well after your letter…I don't really know what I'm doing here. I guess I wanted to see it for myself." Angela understood. Her sobriety was unfathomable to everyone, including Angela herself. It made sense that Elizabeth would come, would want to see with her own eyes.

Angela's mind was ricocheting around her skull now. She felt physically weak and just slightly nauseous. For several seconds she flashed on a memory of being on a roller coaster in Coney Island with her dad: it was the only recollection in her

limbic system's warehouse that came close to what she was experiencing: euphoria mixed with dread. Elizabeth was *here*. Out of arm's reach but physically, solidly here, right here in front of her after an inordinate amount of time and space, no longer just an apparition, not the memory of her but *her*. Angela was incapable of processing multitudes of competing emotions and thoughts, instincts and proclivities. What did it *mean* that she was here? That she had driven a couple hours straight to Angela's door without warning and, from the looks of it, without any sort of plan of what she was going to say or do? Elizabeth started fidgeting and shifting, one foot to the other and back again. This fidgeting made Angela worry that Elizabeth might now turn and flee; run to her car and peel out on the gravel, taillights fading for the last time.

"Everything okay out here?"

Angela had completely forgotten Terry gracefully bowing out of whatever was to come once Angela had opened the screen door. It seemed enough time had gone by without Angela coming back inside that Terry had felt compelled to investigate. Angela and Elizabeth said, "Everything's fine," practically at the same moment. A hastily-thrown-together plan was agreed upon, for better or worse. Elizabeth would follow Angela and Terry to the restaurant where they were meeting Joe. Terry and Joe would dine at one table, while Angela and Elizabeth would eat together at a separate table. This seemed reasonable, albeit awkward, to all parties under the circumstances.

Once safe inside her car with Terry, Angela lit a cigarette and began chattering rapidly about what was happening and how she felt and what she should do and what she wanted to say and what she thought might or might not happen. Terry said, "Take a breath," and held Angela's hand. "It's going to be okay." Then added, "I'm here for you," as if simply speaking these words would cast a spell of protection.

Angela kept obsessively checking her rearview while she drove to make sure Elizabeth was still following her. Each time she glanced up she expected to discover that Liz was no longer behind her, that she had come to her senses and decided this

little road trip had been a terrible idea and was already on the highway headed north. With a genuine sense of wonder and amazement, Angela pulled into a parking spot at the restaurant and Elizabeth pulled in beside her. Terry asked, “Are you sure you wanna do this?”

Was she? The sober and spiritual Angela knew that this was emotional suicide. “No. I’m not sure. But I’m doing it anyway.”

Angela sat across from Elizabeth in a booth, directly behind Terry and Joe, so that she could make eye contact with Terry over Liz’s shoulder if she needed to feel safe or reassured. She avoided eye contact with Elizabeth because she knew that if she held her gaze for too long, the sense of falling would envelop her. She would be unable to tune out the reverie, the absolute certainty that if she could somehow figure out the perfect equation, the ultimate set of ideal circumstances, the exact calibrations of all the moving parts, she and Elizabeth would finally land in the relationship they had always wanted with one another.

After rehashing their exchanged emails, Elizabeth asked several questions about Angela’s sobriety, her therapy, her twelve-step work with what seemed like a sort of professional, clinical curiosity. They picked at their food and sat in uncomfortable, weighted silence.

Angela blurted out, “So…you know…since we are right here, right now…I would be…remiss if I didn’t ask…do you think it’s possible that…you and I…maybe we could…see what it’s like with me sober…”

These words floated in the air above Angela, as she sat helpless, unable to take them back. She had not intended to say any such thing. Her shadow self had silently emerged—she could feel it leave her body and hover, orchestrating this conversation, completely beyond her feeble, human control. The crow. Had it followed her here? She didn’t see it anywhere in the restaurant, didn’t sense the ugly eyes and coldness. But that didn’t mean it wasn’t taking over when all her will failed completely.

“I’m in a relationship with someone. And it’s a good one.”

“Dustin?”

“Yes.”

Of course, *Dustin*. Why wouldn't she? He was the only constant she had in her life besides her family, providing Liz with the stability that she both craved and abhorred. Angela had been a constant of a sort, yes, but not anymore. Knowing she was with Dustin again actually gave Angela some peace. It meant that she had not been able to make things work with anyone else, and Angela was certain that she must have made multiple attempts and failed if she had retreated to the safety net. Elizabeth revealed little else, other than alluding to the fact that she and Dustin had committed to working on their issues (presumably Liz's fear of intimacy and Dustin's codependency) and that they were now living together in the city. Angela thought they obviously still had issues to work on if he had given her his blessing to come here. Or had she come here entirely without his knowledge? Angela asked no questions.

Eventually Terry sauntered over to their table and said, "Joe has another thing he needs to get to, so…."

Angela was reluctant, gripped by the familiar fear that once Elizabeth left she might never see her again. In her magical thinking, Angela believed that if she did not say or do the exact right things in the next few minutes that she would actually *cause* this to occur. Once the four of them were all outside standing in the parking lot, Angela wanted desperately to tell Elizabeth she loved her, to drop to her knees and beg her to come back, to say things she had said a million times before. She knew these actions would not be encouraged by any means, let alone welcome. Instead she said, "I'm glad you came," which, even to her own ears sounded hollow and insincere, but she didn't know what else to say. Elizabeth said, "Me too," and hugged Angela, then pulled away, almost as if she wanted to take such an action so quickly that Angela wouldn't notice it was happening and couldn't respond. And, as planned, before Angela could recover from the shock of being touched by her, before any other words could spill from her mouth, Elizabeth was driving away.

For a minute or two Angela just stood there with a hand on the roof of her car, dazed and slightly light-headed. Terry approached her and gently put her hand under Angela's chin,

turning her head so that their eyes could meet. “Ange? You okay?”

Angela said, “Yeah. I think I’m okay. Will you stay with me tonight? I don’t want to be alone.” Angela had not realized she was going to make this request until she heard herself say the words. Just as she was about to retract, Terry said, “Sure. Can you stop at my place so I can get something to sleep in?”

Angela was having competing emotions as she drove. Some were about Elizabeth, some were about Terry, some she could not adequately separate out in her mind to even know who or what they were about. She replayed her interactions with Elizabeth over and over in her head and did not know how to interpret them. It was as if the thoughts themselves were covered in gelatinous ooze, making it impossible for her to grasp any one thing and hold onto it, consider it, draw a conclusion from it. A sense of dread was mounting, but Angela did not know which circumstance was causing such panic. Was it the prospect of a new iteration of her relationship with Elizabeth, or spending the night with Terry? So she decided to try, as she had been trying in meditation lately, to focus on the present. And presently, she was walking into her apartment with Terry.

That night, Angela felt cared for and comforted in a way that she had not been for a long time. The physical closeness she shared with Terry was not sexual (though desire was surely underneath, bubbling with heat), but more intimate, made so by Angela’s fragile and vulnerable state. She fell asleep in Terry’s arms, and by late the next morning, all of Angela’s attention became focused on her. She took her obsessive thoughts and hopes and wishes about Elizabeth and transferred them to Terry, because she believed that Terry was safer. Though it was true that Terry could not possibly wound Angela any deeper than Elizabeth had (no one could), Angela failed to realize that there were varying degrees of hurt she might suffer. She did not understand that just because a woman was not Elizabeth, that did not protect her from harm. Or, perhaps, she did understand, and, in understanding, formulated the process of always having one wound or another open to the sunlight at any given time. Because if the wounds closed, if the skin healed, then love could not get in.

Angela did not contact Elizabeth again while she wholly enfolded herself into her “friendship” with Terry (“friendship”—another failing of the English language). Terry had told Angela that she believed Angela was going to die when she had seen her last, now more than a year previous. Clearly, the idea that she’d almost lost Angela cemented her attachment, tying them together even more firmly. For Terry, it seemed the gray areas that blurred friendship and sexuality were something she was comfortable with, as comfortable as she was with her own bisexual identity. Angela suspected there was a freedom for her in such openness. Angela also knew that Terry was wary of opening any sexual doors with Angela, because she suspected the potential for painful encounters down the road just as Angela did. But, unlike Angela, Terry stopped to think about the risk versus the reward…Terry did, however, enjoy a heightened level of intimacy, something her new boyfriend seemed incapable of providing. Besides, Angela was content with what they shared.

Perhaps Angela really had accepted their situation for what it was, or Terry simply could no longer practice her diligent restraint in light of an intense attraction. Maybe Angela had become very bold or Terry had become less guarded, or perhaps it was some combination of all these. Or it was some other astrological phenomenon, a miracle shift in the universe. Whatever it was, the next time that Angela and Terry engaged in over an hour of intimate conversation, cuddling, and gentle caressing, Angela kissed Terry. Terry kissed Angela back and, after just a shadow of hesitation, allowed what she had warned Angela would end in disaster to proceed.

So Angela and Terry began regularly having sex. It would not take long for things to unravel, because Terry was also having sex with Shane, and Terry was not interested in commitment or monogamy. Angela said that she was fine with both of these things, but she was lying. Still, for a few months, things between Angela and Terry were good and pleasant and fulfilling.

Naturally, Angela thought it would be a good time to reach out to Elizabeth again. Angela believed (incorrectly) that there was a thick layer of protection that came with being involved with

someone else. What Angela did not know was that self-destructive behavior, bad habits, faulty core beliefs, and other things that cause people to act in direct opposition to their self-interest lay unfathomably deep in the subconscious. When people claim that someone is *in denial,* they speak as if it is a deliberate and willful act, as if a person consciously chooses to deny the truth of some matter or circumstance. In reality, being in denial only means that one has not made a connection to their subconscious where that particular truth resides. It wasn't as if Angela recognized a falsehood and decided to accept it as truth anyway. Rather, she went along with what was easy to believe, what aligned with what her conscious mind wanted, and proceeded without really giving it much thought at all. Angela did acknowledge to herself, however, that she would be delighted if Elizabeth were just the slightest bit jealous.

Chapter 11

So Elizabeth and Angela began speaking on the phone again regularly, mostly about Angela and Terry, as Angela had little else to discuss. She was disappointed that Elizabeth did not seem at all jealous. She did, however, seem concerned that Angela had willingly entered into a non-monogamous relationship; she knew this didn't suit Angela emotionally.

"You totally give yourself to one person at a time," Liz said. "There is no way that you won't develop insecurities around Terry sleeping with someone else."

Angela protested, claiming that she had grown emotionally and could handle such an arrangement. Angela believed that women like Terry and Elizabeth were more emotionally mature than she was, that *clearly* they had mountains of self-esteem, because they could separate sex from emotion and Angela had never been able to do so. Angela admired their ability to have meaningless sex, perhaps because she equated "meaningless" with "emotionally safe." Angela thought they were empowered women, in complete control of their sexuality and their emotions. Angela was a long way from grasping that all people are damaged to one degree or another, that they develop traits and behaviors based on their own personal history of trauma and disappointment. Everyone has the potential to struggle with intimacy; just because the nun and the whore appear very different does not mean that their struggle with personal relationships is not similar. Terry and Elizabeth and any number of other women Angela would come into contact with were not *better* than Angela because they could detach at will, but that is what she believed.

Joanne had been Angela's first sexual experience beyond the typical "I'll show you mine if you show me yours" curiosities of youth she had experienced with boys. Once, when she was ten, an older boy had put his finger on her clitoris when he was holding her floating in a swimming pool at the neighbor's house. He asked her if it felt good. She was afraid so she said nothing, and the boy said, "I did this to a girl once and she said it felt

good," and then took his hand away.

Angela had most of her sexual firsts with Jo, first orgasm (not acquired through masturbation), first oral sex (giving and receiving), first experience of climaxing at the exact same moment as someone else. She would move on to experimenting with different positions, kinks, and tricks when she was with Emily several years later. By the time she began meeting one-night stands at gay bars, she was well versed in toys and accessories.

One thing that Angela had come to understand by adulthood was that being a skilled lover was a powerful force. It was something that influenced women to behave in ways and make decisions they might not otherwise. It was this attribute combined with Angela's sincerity that won over a fair share of women throughout the years and made it difficult for them to leave once Angela became clingy.

For Angela, having a particular skill set did nothing to improve her self-esteem. If anything, she had begun to suspect that her sexual prowess is what gave her worth in the world of relationships. Terry was not the first woman to whom she had whispered, "I want to make you feel something you've never felt before." Angela had developed a skewed view over the years that she would need to hook women with sex first, and then, if she could keep them coming back long enough, they would grow to love her for other reasons.

When the relationship between Angela and Terry began to deteriorate, Angela sought counsel, comfort, and reassurance from Elizabeth. Angela knew that she had been an excellent lover, but Terry was leaving anyway. In truth, Angela knew they were ill-suited romantically. She did not say aloud any of the things that bothered her about Terry, preferring instead to believe herself a hapless victim yet again. Elizabeth told Angela that whether she was willing to concede to it or not, she was a one-partner-oriented person, there was nothing wrong with that, and she should stop trying to be anything other than what she was. Angela listened to Liz tell her that she deserved a partner who could love as fully and as deeply as Angela did, but Angela only wondered why that partner couldn't be Elizabeth. She

understood why it couldn’t be Terry. Angela also found it interesting that Liz was being contradictory to her own advice, as she herself changed what she was in order to be monogamous and committed to Dustin. At least Angela assumed that she was being faithful. She wondered if she should be questioning that, for Elizabeth was certainly capable of, even skilled at, deceit.

Chapter 12

Liz eventually revealed that not only were she and Dustin living together, they were engaged. This only fazed Angela slightly, as she believed this to be a natural progression; she had known for years that at some point Dustin would make an attempt to ensure that Liz would not leave him again. It was also somewhat of a relief because if Elizabeth remained with Dustin, that would make Angela a permanent fixture in Elizabeth's life; Liz would always need someone to share things with that she would never share with him. So Angela was not surprised by the news of their engagement at all, only slightly flummoxed, because she had a strong belief that Elizabeth would not follow through with a commitment of any sort, really, especially marriage. She might try it—because she believed it was what she *should* do—for a week or a month or a year or even several years, but eventually, Elizabeth would not be able to outpace her own core instincts, no matter how flawed she might believe them to be.

By summer that year Angela was still going to the strip club to see Jennifer again, made more laborious because she now also had to avoid Terry. Angela tried to use the combination of Jennifer, a phone relationship with Elizabeth, her fantasy life, and a host of platonic friendships to fulfill herself emotionally. Although occasionally satisfied, most of the time it was not enough. She still had a vacuous hole within, left behind by a life of drugs and alcohol and an absence of purpose or hope. She had been counseled to fill this void with her spirituality and her higher power but at the end of the day she was still going to bed alone, no matter how much she came to believe in and even value spiritual things. So she began internet dating.

While the experiment of dating lasted less than three months and did not amount to finding romantic love, it did garner several benefits for Angela. To begin with, before getting sober Angela had never really 'dated' at all. She jumped into relationships headfirst and impulsively and initiated sexual contact almost immediately. Going to dinner and talking on the phone as a means of getting to know someone was a completely

new experience. She found the only difference between doing this and how she had established new friendships was that her desire for romantic partnership was explicit, if she and the other person had met on a dating website, the guesswork was removed. She also learned that she could find a woman visually striking but not be attracted to them on an emotional or intellectual level. Angela found it quite remarkable that most people her age already knew these things and equally remarkable that most recovering drug addicts did not. She had also made a contract of sorts with herself about finding someone; if she saw a chance worth taking, she would take it, but the moment that Liz seemed open to getting back together, the other person would be abandoned immediately.

In the middle of Angela's dating season, Dustin and Elizabeth decided to visit. They had an annual tradition with friends in Angela's area; every Memorial Day weekend they met with these friends and drove to their favorite steakhouse, an hour away across the state line, for dinner. This visit, they invited Angela, an outsider to this tradition, to join them, presumably because they needed a place to stay while they were in town. Angela believed this arrangement would be safe because she would not be in sexual peril with Elizabeth while Dustin was with them, especially since their threesome dynamic was now drastically altered by their (presumed) monogamy. Angela had not seen Dustin in a couple of years at that point and was actually looking forward to spending some time with him again. If Angela was re-establishing her connection with Elizabeth, she would need to do so with Dustin by matter of extension.

When Elizabeth and Dustin arrived that Friday evening, Angela's expectations of awkwardness were met and exceeded. Dustin, who had never previously been particularly affectionate with Elizabeth, seemed to be making a concentrated effort to be extra attentive. It was obviously his attempt to maintain a physical barrier between the two women. But as the evening marched onward beyond dinner to a coffee shop, each of them slowly began to relax, and by the time they went to bed, some normalcy and a sense of familiarity settled over the trio.

The next day Angela was up first. The kitchen was a narrow galley right next to the main room, so getting a cup of coffee without waking her guests took some dexterity. Instead of sitting in her comfortable-but-squeaky favorite chair in the living room as she normally did in the morning, she just stood at her kitchen sink, cupping her hands around her mug, listening to the purr of her cat Sebastian as he wound his way around her ankles. Angela took a few silent steps into the living room in her socked feet. Dustin was sleeping on the side of the futon, against the wall. Angela recalled that sleeping next to a wall made Elizabeth feel slightly claustrophobic; the bed that they had shared in Elizabeth's old apartment had the headboard against the wall in the middle of the room, as did her own bed. While Angela was ruminating on what it felt like to have Elizabeth's warm body next to hers, Liz's eyelids fluttered open. She rolled onto her side, facing Angela, then she said, "Mm. Hi," and smiled at her. Angela's heart skipped a beat, the familiar dark wings of passion beating silently in the surrounding air.

Angela made breakfast for everyone then took a shower and got ready for a lunch date with another internet prospect. The crow came and perched atop the glass shower door, cawing, "What folly! Do you really think anyone can love you?"

She sat with her guests in the living room and told them about the afternoon's candidate, the woman she was meeting was attractive, smart, funny, but Angela did not believe they had all that much in common. They had entirely different tastes in music and books, and the woman was very informed about politics and world events, while Angela herself had never been. Still, it was another attempt, though Angela admitted she was finding the process of dating exhausting. To date, the greatest benefit had been forging new platonic friendships outside of recovery. Angela had come to believe it was highly unlikely that she would meet her next partner on the dating sites, but she might meet the person who would introduce her to the person who would introduce her to the person. Besides, lesbian women on dating websites were in short supply in Angela's area, and she kept finding the same women repeated on all the websites

she had discovered. As she spoke, Angela became aware that until she had said these things to Elizabeth and Dustin out loud, she had not known she found the process of dating exhausting and was about ready to throw in the towel.

She realized, with mounting dread, that she had not actually felt this way until last night, that her enthusiasm for dating and meeting new women had tremendously waned in just the last day. Angela blurted, “I was excited about this date initially, but now, I feel like I don’t even want to go, and I’m not sure why that is.” Dustin said nothing, but he didn’t have to. He looked directly, almost confrontationally, at Angela, then at Elizabeth, then back at Angela. Angela understood that he had just succinctly confirmed her fears. Elizabeth pretended not to notice this exchange.

Angela went on the date because it was the right thing to do, not because she wanted to. It was a pleasant date with intelligent conversation, but there would be no plans for a second date—actually Angela had had no second dates at all—and Angela did not linger over coffee and dessert, preferring to escape as quickly as possible. When Elizabeth and Dustin came back to Angela’s apartment later that afternoon and asked about her date, Angela said only, “It was okay. She’s not really my type.”

When Liz and Dustin’s friends came to pick them up for the evening’s adventure, and they all piled into the car, Dustin got in the front passenger’s seat and Angela and Liz got in the back with the other woman. Now Elizabeth and Angela were in the closest physical proximity they had been in since Liz’s surprise visit, which now felt like a lifetime ago. Angela began to sweat. There was an hour-long drive ahead. She could feel Elizabeth’s thigh pressed up against hers and tried to enjoy the sensation but could not. Helplessly Angela stared out the window at the cars on the other side of the interstate and tried to focus on her own breathing, as a Buddhist meditation class she attended had taught her. Her lack of participation in the group conversation did not go unnoticed as she’d hoped it would, and after twenty minutes, Elizabeth leaned over and asked, “You okay?” It was the first time Angela had made eye contact with

her since they'd been in the car. "What? Yeah, I'm great, just thinking." As she turned away to go back to intently examining the cars on the other side of the concrete divider, Elizabeth took Angela's hand and held it. Dustin looked almost imperceptibly over his shoulder at this and said nothing, and Elizabeth's friend on the other side of her, who was aware of the history between Angela and Liz, also said nothing. It was almost as though every occupant of the vehicle condoned this affection. But Angela knew better. And Elizabeth, well Elizabeth simply did not care.

Chapter 13

The greatest friend that Angela found through dating sites was Catherine. Although on their first date Angela found Catherine extremely attractive, she could tell right away that Catherine did not have similar thoughts about Angela. Though her pride was injured a little by this, Angela was surprised to find that she was not bothered as much as she might have been in earlier years. Because although Angela and Catherine were by no means a good romantic match, and perhaps because of their very differences, they quite enjoyed each other's company and were highly amused by one another. So they began to meet for dinner and coffee, over which they traded stories about the best and worst of their other internet dates.

About a month after the visit-steakhouse-road-trip-hand-holding experience of which no one ever spoke, Angela asked Elizabeth if she and Catherine could come up to the city for Pride Weekend and stay with her and Dustin. Knowing that Elizabeth was an ex, Catherine seemed to be holding something back from their conversations, but Angela knew she had plans to meet a potential date.

Once they arrived at Liz and Dustin's apartment, the ambiance was pleasant and congenial. Dustin seemed more comfortable having a fourth person, and Angela assumed (correctly) that he was unaware that Catherine was not a romantic prospect for Angela.

After a light brunch of fresh fruit and toast, Elizabeth asked Angela if she wanted to see the art installations at the park down the street she had told her about on the phone. Apparently, a bunch of local artists unofficially took over a pocket park and left their own artwork unmonitored, solely for the purpose of the community's enjoyment. In other areas of the city, such bold belief in the inherent goodness of strangers would have been decimated, abused, and graffitied within the first twenty-four hours, but not in this area where Liz and Dustin had taken up residence. There was one installation in particular that Elizabeth wanted Angela to see: a makeshift canvas tent where

the artist had left a bound journal and a pencil for the park visitors to write in. She had been amazed at what people had chosen to write, from the banal to the deeply profound, from drunken rambling to moving descriptions of how the “Tent Unoccupied” exhibit made them feel. Elizabeth and Angela had always shared an almost reverent admiration for all things artistic: music, written word, painting, sculpture, dance, any display of personal expression. So this opportunity to share something together was rife with anticipation. Angela could feel Liz’s excitement and it made her that much more excited as well.

Catherine did not know Angela terribly well at the time, but she was intuitive, and the palpable chemistry between Elizabeth and Angela that was evident from the moment they arrived made it clear there was something unresolved there. So when Elizabeth mentioned the part installation, Catherine said, “Not really my thing, but you go ahead.” The ever-polite Dustin offered to stay behind so that their guest wasn’t just left to hang out in an unfamiliar place alone.

Once outside, the summer air instantly felt lighter. Angela always felt different when she was alone with Elizabeth, absent the fear of constantly being judged and evaluated by others (absent the crow, too, who apparently could not fly this far north). She had come to believe over the years that literally everyone saw her as either naive or insane for continuing to either have feelings for or maintain a relationship with Elizabeth, that the only hope for Angela to ever have a real romantic partnership with anyone would be to cut ties completely.

The two of them walked silently toward the park for a while, then Elizabeth stopped, turned, hugged Angela, and said, “I’m glad you’re here.” Then she started walking again. This was something that had always given Angela feelings of pleasant bewilderment; Elizabeth’s moments of tenderness were always entirely unexpected, maximizing their impact. In turn, Elizabeth seemed surprised only when Angela *wasn’t* tender or loving, for even in their darkest days, it was unusual for her to be anything but nurturing in that way.

They walked around the art installation for some time,

investigating various works, then they sat down together on a small cot inside the tent with the journal. Elizabeth showed Angela some of her favorite passages, added her own, then handed the journal to Angela to do the same. Angela wrote a short passage describing how the sun filtering through the leaves looked from inside the tent and how summer tasted in that particular moment, like heat and salt and rain.

Elizabeth said, “I need you to be my friend now. There are things I’ve needed to say out loud but didn’t have anyone to say them to. I don’t want you to say anything. I just need you to listen.” Angela heard that she was afraid, confused, unsure of what she was doing. Angela had gradually developed a working part of her mind and her heart, learned how to *really* hear Elizabeth, to take a step back from her own motives and feelings, to listen to her with openness. When Elizabeth asked her opinion, Angela—grateful to be asked, but cautious nonetheless—filtered her answers through a “friendship” lens to the best of her ability. She knew that Elizabeth had come to trust Angela again, and that made her feel privileged. When Liz’s soliloquy had ended, they sat in silence for a while, holding hands. When she felt enough time had passed that it was all right to say something, Angela said, “It’s all going to be okay.”

“You are the only person who says that to me, and I actually believe it.”

As they walked up the stairs and down the hallway to the apartment, they could hear Catherine and Dustin laughing. Inside, it was immediately clear that the two of them had smoked some pot while Angela and Elizabeth had been down in the park. Catherine said, “You don’t mind, do you?”

Angela did not; Catherine had kept Dustin entertained for her benefit, and she thought this very sweet. Covert glances bounced around the room. Angela would look at Elizabeth, asking silently, “You okay?” Elizabeth’s face would reply, “Yeah.” Catherine would glance at Angela with the same, “You okay?” question, and Angela would also silently respond, “Yeah, I’m okay.” Elizabeth and Dustin may have been having their own nonverbal exchange, but Angela didn’t think so.

Later, the four of them walked to the train station and arrived a few stops later in the heart of Downtown, where they were met with the typical chaos of a big-city Pride weekend. They explored for a while, sat outside a bar, and people-watched: flamboyant drag queens, butch daddy leather kings, gawking tourists. In this atmosphere, Angela felt a unique and palpable connection to Elizabeth. It was a dynamic she had sensed before: if Liz were with Dustin alone at Pride, or in any other gay atmosphere, she was just another straight girl (or so she would be perceived). But when she was standing so close to Angela, she felt and was identified by others as part of the LGBT community. Angela thought this was something that Elizabeth struggled with deeply. The draw of bisexual identity was, for Liz, a politically charged, social-activist-driven declaration. Being with Angela, or any woman for that matter, carried this appeal.

* * * *

When Angela was twenty, she began to embrace her homosexuality. She had dated the last man she would ever date, who was actually integral to her coming to terms with herself. She'd had the good fortune of dating a good, kind, sensitive, and understanding man. The irony was not lost on her, having many straight female friends who spent their lives searching for such a man.

Angela's community college did not have any sort of LGBT student organization. She would create one during her second year. That first year, though, in an effort to seek out her own kind, she began attending meetings at a local university's club. There, she met a woman named Laurie, who became her first gay trusted confidante.

Laurie introduced Angela to other, slightly older lesbians and gay men. When summer came and Pride season with it, she was invited to attend the Pride Parade in New York. If New York is your very first Pride Parade, all others will pale in comparison for the rest of your gay life.

On the day of the parade, Angela and six of her new

friends rode what was affectionately termed The Queer Train into the heart of Greenwich Village at ten A.M., and the streets were already teeming with throngs, though the parade wouldn't begin for a few hours. Angela, like so many of her predecessors attending their first Pride, could not believe how many people were there. Over the course of the day, with each location they wandered, each entertainment venue they visited, each glorious parade float they witnessed, she grew more and more emotional. What an amazing discovery that thousands shared the same experience, the same struggle, and ultimately the same joy of being out. That Pride parade in New York City was the first time Angela ever had the feeling of belonging, of acceptance, that so eluded her in other areas of her life.

* * * *

When the sun began to set, the foursome went to meet Catherine's date for dinner, and it became obvious not long after that Catherine would not be spending the night at Liz and Dustin's. Angela was dismayed by this only a little, mostly out of concern for her friend going home with someone she had literally just met. But they were consenting adults, and Angela was quickly more focused on the possibility of stealing more moments alone with Elizabeth back at the apartment.

By the time they headed for the train, the whole group of them were fairly intoxicated except, of course, for Angela. She had a momentary pang of envy for drinkers. That, though, was overtaken by her maternal instinct to protect her fledgling cohorts once Catherine and her date headed in one direction and she, Elizabeth, and Dustin in the other. She guided them into the train, made sure they got off at the right stop, and helped them up the stairs in the apartment building. Once inside, Dustin made a pot of coffee and the three of them sat around the kitchen table and talked for a while, drinking coffee and water and sobering up a bit. After about an hour, Dustin went to bed and Elizabeth went to retrieve linens and pillows for the pull-out sofa. Once the bed was made up and Angela was in it, she couldn't help but ask,

“Will you lay down with me for a while?”

Elizabeth hesitated, then said, “You know I can’t do that.”

Angela wasn’t sure how to interpret that. Did Liz mean she could not do that because her husband-to-be was in the next room, and therefore, such an action was morally wrong? Or did she mean if she relented, one thing would ultimately lead to another, and that was *definitely* morally wrong? Angela was ashamed that she had even asked and knew that Elizabeth knew that Angela was ashamed to the point of self-flagellation. No one knew the depths of Angela’s shame more intimately. Liz knelt on the bed and hugged Angela tightly, then she kissed her on the cheek and went away. Angela cried herself to sleep.

The next morning Angela had breakfast with Elizabeth and Dustin at a diner down the street. She had developed the skill of temporarily withdrawing emotionally while remaining pleasant and present. Her shut-down mode used to be painfully obvious, but now it was finely tuned enough to at least fool Dustin. But not Liz, who kept looking at her with an expression that was something like a combination of concern and longing, which Angela steadfastly ignored. After breakfast, Catherine had texted that her date was driving her back to Liz and Dustin’s to pick up her car and Angela and start heading for home. For Angela, the sooner they were on the highway the better, because her emotional wall would not last long. Though Angela had learned to build this wall between herself and Elizabeth, it had always been constructed of flimsy materials; straw, plywood, the occasional Styrofoam. The foundation was always weak. By the time Elizabeth hugged Angela goodbye and Angela got into Catherine’s car for the trip home, it had already begun to crumble. For love, after all, is both enduring and fragile. When Angela got home the crow was waiting for her.

* * * *

Two weeks after Pride, Liz and Angela had returned to their status quo, long-distance emotional attachment and frequent phone calls and emails. Angela peppered their

conversations with what she believed was just the right amount of intimacy and provocative statements. (“I miss you.” “I wish you were here.” “If I could, I would hug you right now.”) Sometimes these statements and declarations of yearning were returned in kind, sometimes they were met with thoughtful silence. When Liz told Angela that she and Dustin had split up and broken off the engagement, Angela’s heart soared just a little, dampened only slightly by Elizabeth’s proclamation:

“I need you to understand that just because I am not with him does not necessarily mean that I am going to be with you.”

But Angela began to do what she always did whenever Elizabeth ended anything with anyone; she began to plant new seeds of hope. Within that allegorical garden that Liz and Angela cultivated together, Angela had a secret corner in the shade, where it was difficult for things to grow unless the seeds were hearty and robust. But Angela knew nothing in the world was more resilient than her love for Elizabeth, it would withstand season after season; drought, flood, frost, endless sunshine.

* * * *

Several months after the dissolution of the engagement, Angela invited Elizabeth to accompany her on a twelve-step camping trip. Liz had met Angela’s recovery friends many times, so it wasn’t as if she would be spending the weekend with complete strangers. Angela felt that the more Elizabeth was included in Angela’s everyday life, the more her dream of them being an actual couple once more took shape. Making this a reality was difficult given their geographic distance. Liz seemed determined to stay in the city where she was, which didn’t lend itself to them seeing each other as often as Angela would like, though she knew it was exactly as often as Liz would like. Elizabeth easily felt suffocated. Angela was sure she had only survived living with Dustin for as long as she had because she had been so used to him; he had been in her life for so long that she had simply forgotten he was there. It was becoming clearer to Angela that for Liz, the vaguest notion of sharing living space

with anyone she was intimately involved with filled her with terror. She liked having a platonic roommate to share expenses and responsibilities, but a live-in lover was a concept she really wasn't up for.

Angela felt a tiny wave of victorious euphoria whenever she asked Elizabeth to do something with her and expected to be refused, only to have Elizabeth agree. There was still residual delight about the camping trip when Liz arrived at her door early that Saturday morning. The two-and-a-half-hour drive to the southern tip of the state was uneventful. Angela was silently recounting all that she and Elizabeth had done together over the years and realized this was the first time they were spending a weekend together somewhere other than one of their homes. Angela felt this was terribly exciting for them, a real step toward partnership: Wasn't this what couples did, after all? She knew that she must contain her excitement, her ideas, fantasies, because Liz was like a skittish cat now whenever they spent more than twenty-four hours together. At the first sign of Angela's hopefulness, she would recoil. It took focused and sustained effort for Angela to pretend that the weekend trip was enough, that intimacy without sex was enough, that anything shy of marriage and fidelity and total devotion could be enough.

The first day was pleasant, a day filled with good conversation and hearty laughs, walks around the majestic area, and a canoe ride down the nearby river. Angela delighted in setting up their tent, assembling their cots, running cords to the nearest power source so they could use a fan (it was dreadfully hot). Liz lounged and drank iced tea and played with the abundance of children and dogs that were present. After the late-night bonfire AA meeting, they retired to a slightly cooler tent, and although Angela had laid their cots close together, Elizabeth got into hers and rolled over, giving Angela her back, and said good-night.

The second day ushered in Angela's discontent and Elizabeth's nervousness. Angela knew their desires were not in sync, and Elizabeth was showing signs of feeling claustrophobic. By evening, Angela was avoiding eye contact and busying herself with helping others clean up after dinner. She did small tasks

around their campsite with earnestness and a sense of urgency. Eventually Liz cornered her and said the words that Angela had come to fear from her more than any others; “We need to talk.”

The conversation they had inside the tent (as if a canvas tent afforded any sort of real privacy) was not markedly different than the conversations they had been having every so often for years aside from one specific difference. This time Elizabeth said she had begun to believe that she was “mostly” straight. Angela wondered why she had waited until this moment to say something instead of before the trip. She was always crushed by Elizabeth’s rejection, but this particular thing was something that perhaps she could learn to live with over time. After all, in the pool of the many lovers that Elizabeth had over the years, very few of them had been women. When those occasions cropped up, they seemed to be less meaningful, shorter lived relationships. With the men, Angela never had to ask herself, “What does *he* have that I don’t have?”

Whenever Elizabeth gave her a reason that they would never be together, not *really* together, Angela would review their history. She took stock of any and all evidence to support the current claim and any and all evidence refuting it. In her mind, she always had more evidence to the contrary. And instead of coming to the conclusion that Liz had poor boundaries or that she sent mixed signals or that she used Angela to meet her own needs when she was unwilling to do the same, she always decided instead that Liz was simply not ready. Not ready for commitment. Not ready to stop denying herself happiness. Not ready to fully embrace adulthood and forever abandon a fairy-tale ideal of partnership. In this instance, Angela decided that Liz was simply not ready to admit that, deep down, her sexual preference didn’t matter. She loved Angela and wanted to be with her, *that* was the thing she wasn’t ready for at this time. Through this highly specialized system of mental gymnastics, Angela was able to remain in denial.

Despite the intellectual processes churning in her mind, Angela fell apart quite spectacularly after Liz’s revelation. She resorted to begging and pleading. She bullied Liz into affection

with angry tears and accusations. She demanded reassurances about their relationship and her inherent *specialness* in Elizabeth's life, that no matter what happened she would always be there. Furthermore, if Liz were to decide down the road that she *could* remain with a woman long term, Angela was the only possible candidate. Elizabeth conceded to her impossible expectations and assured Angela repeatedly that she had never intended to inflict pain. It just kept happening.

Part 4

What we share may be a lot like a traffic accident but we get one another. We are survivors of each other. We have been shark to one another, but also lifeboat. That counts for something.
—Margaret Atwood, *Cat's Eye*

Chapter 14

The camping trip was now far behind them, a distant and softened memory. Angela had receded for almost two months with no contact after their return, but as inevitably happened, she gave into her longing. She had friends, and she had been celibate for some time now, so she was not prey to wholesale loneliness anymore. But she grew lonely for Elizabeth specifically. The crow was making nightly appearances, scurrying around the brick walls, whispering condemnations.

"She's not straight and you know that. She wants to be with a woman, she just doesn't want to be with *you*."

Angela believed that she fell *in* love very easily; as a matter of fact she could fall into infatuation with almost anyone. But at the end of the day, the only person she truly loved was Elizabeth. And she often felt like Elizabeth was the only person who truly loved her. Not in the romantic partner sense of the word, but a greater love, a more majestic love. Angela had invited Liz back into her life after each wounding, each heartbreak, each (perceived) betrayal. Liz accepted each invitation after each manipulation, each unfair treatment, each emotional blackmail. They always forgave one another their faults and their personal demons and their resistance to one another's wills. Was this not, in a sense, an unconditional love? A greater, more permanent love than the whimsy of romance? Elizabeth may have been a precarious constant, but a constant, nevertheless. So perhaps it really would be okay if she wound up with someone else, because that person would never have what Angela had with Liz.

Angela needed something to do besides work, go to AA meetings, and obsess about Elizabeth. Through a series of

fortunate events, she happened to meet the director of the women's studies program at the university. Together over a lunch hour, they created a mission called the WMSC, the Women's Music Series Coalition. The idea was to showcase local female artists in a concert and charge optional admission as a donation to benefit a local woman-centered charity. The proceeds would be split fifty/fifty, half to a charity, half to the performers, so each show both supported a cause and the female artists themselves. Within the first two months the organization hosted three concerts at a local performance space that was cheap to rent. The WMSC raised money for Planned Parenthood, the local domestic violence shelter, and the rape crisis hotline. They were highlighted in the local press and, overall, the organization was a huge success.

Though Angela didn't play an instrument and could just barely carry a tune, she had always been a music enthusiast and was pretty good at identifying raw talent. She had always befriended local musicians wherever she lived and was shocked to discover some of them in the rooms of AA when she first became sober. Now, with the WMSC doing so well, her repeated attendance at local shows was paying off; the musicians were happy to support her cause when she asked them to perform. The work involved in putting events together was something that Angela was passionate about, and it also bolstered her ego. Often while setting up for a show she had grand delusions about reinventing herself as a concert promoter or some kind of music business executive.

Angela invited Elizabeth to town to attend the next concert. She made deals with herself and her feelings, making solemn vows about how she would behave, not to fawn or reject. She wanted to try to just be friends with Elizabeth and act accordingly. Angela must have forgotten that these deals always seemed to fail. For a lifetime she had tried to feel a way she did not feel, not want something she desperately wanted, not be drawn to painful things that drew her like a magnet. After so many years, Elizabeth was still as strong as gravity, as seductive as the sea.

Liz was late to arrive, so they had to make haste for the venue. On the way, Angela listened intently while Liz talked about her current job, her exhaustion, her discontentedness. Angela was overcome with a yearning to touch her and without thinking, put a hand on Liz's thigh. There were times when Angela's physical desire for Liz simply stood up and refused to be ignored, and in these moments, Angela had the vaguest sensation of watching herself from afar, now observing her own hand like a dream sequence filmed in slow motion. When the hand came to rest on Liz's thigh she heard, or she thought she heard, a pause and a sharp intake of breath before the dialogue about the doctoral program continued.

Angela planted Elizabeth in the front row and left her there while she went about her WMSC duties; collecting donations at the door, directing the caterer where to put the small spread her co-founder had ordered, and then, finally, going down to the basement where the green rooms were located to check on her musicians. (Angela did think of them as *her* musicians, at least for the evening.) The last dressing room held Kayla, the singer/songwriter who had become a good friend to Angela. Stepping over the threshold Angela said, "Liz is here."

"Too much trouble," said Kayla.

Angela looked at her quizzically.

"'Too Much Trouble,' that's the song I'll play for the two of you."

Angela smiled. She had heard Kayla sing this song before, and it was certainly a ballad that fit. The singer was curious about where a relationship could lead, what it's possibilities could be. The recipient was lukewarm about the relationship at best and thought pursuing hopeful chances was too much work.

When Angela was climbing the stairs back to the main show floor, she was enveloped in the fantasy of a stadium crowd above her, clapping and stamping their feet, frenzied for the main attraction to step out of the shadows and take up their instruments. A successful promoter, she was (A venue manager? A booking agent?), one of the best, and in demand all over the country (the world?). She could have stayed home from the shows, but she enjoyed seeing the fruits of her labor. Because her

career had been so lucrative, Elizabeth did not have to work but chose to, in a successful psychiatric practice she owned upstate. Tonight, Angela had brought Liz with her to the show because one of her favorite female artists was performing. Together they would sit in the box booth and watch the show, holding hands like the old married couple they had become.

The lights from the stage jarred Angela back to reality when she reached the top of the stairs. No crowd of thousands, no arena. She laughed at herself a little, then went to the sound board for one last check-in with the audio technician; they would be recording this concert and livestreaming it over the local public access radio station. Yes, this was a small operation, but nevertheless impressive.

Liz apparently thought so too. Angela noticed that she seemed hypnotized, watching her. She could feel Liz's gaze while she carried out her duties, as various volunteers approached her with questions or sought instruction, when the musicians hugged her or offered high-fives, and especially when the women's studies dean—highly respected in academic circles—deferred to Angela's requests to move this or that table or chair. When Angela finally sat down, Liz leaned over and kissed her on the cheek and said, "This is really terrific. Thanks for inviting me."

Angela's friend Kayla was the last musician to play, the headliner. Kayla had a fanatical local following and was likely responsible for the record turnout: it was the first time the WMSC had cracked a thousand. By the time the opening verse of "Too Much Trouble" worked its way through the crowd, Angela turned to Elizabeth and they locked eyes. Liz said, "I feel it too," though Angela had said nothing. She didn't have to. Liz edged closer in her chair until Angela felt her hand slightly caressing the nape of her neck.

After the show, the couple joined the musicians for a bite to eat. Yes, in public this night, Angela and Elizabeth looked like a couple. Anyone who didn't know them would have thought so. At one point the dean whispered to Angela, "I can see why you're so smitten." Angela allowed herself to be swept up in the illusion again.

Liz decided to drive home that night, though it was very, very late. Angela understood her choice; they would have made love if she'd stayed.

* * * *

A few weeks later, on a Friday, Angela took a call from the vet and learned that her familiar, her most beloved of pets, would need to be put down. He was diabetic and had been doing fine, but the disease had progressed, and the blood work showed it was no longer manageable. Angela was so distraught, she did something completely spontaneous—she decided to go visit Elizabeth, unannounced, something she'd never done before. Once she was in the car, she decided to call about two-thirds of the way up there, just to make sure that Liz would at least be home when she arrived. It was a Friday evening after all. Why not? After the WMSC concert, they had again settled back into the comfortable familiarity of less-than-lovers-but-more-than-friends, and Angela had entered yet another period of false contentedness.

When Angela stopped at a service station to call Elizabeth, she hesitated and considered going back home. Angela had a sneaking suspicion that some divine interventionist had planted the thought in her head. She dialed. Liz seemed almost delighted about an unexpected visit, but she was sad about Sebastian, whom she had grown very fond of. And she was sad for Angela and wanted to comfort her. So she gave Angela the best possible route in the city to avoid traffic and told her to call when she was close so that she could come down and help to find a place to park.

When Liz got into the car, Angela started to cry unexpectedly. She realized that making the decision to come here and the drive itself had been distracting her from sadness. She had put enough food and water down for Sebastian for the weekend and then had left almost immediately because she couldn't bear to look at him, to hold him to her chest and listen to him purr. Elizabeth hugged her and brushed the tears from her cheek.

Parking secured for the night, Elizabeth led her up the stairs to the apartment. The roommate was not home. Angela was surprised to learn that Liz hadn't broken any plans to be with her here, that when she called, Liz was watching TV and making something to eat. Angela always imagined that Elizabeth was out until all hours with all manner of bar riffraff vying for her attention. Angela put down her overnight bag.

"Would you like to go out for something to eat? Or could I make you something?" Liz asked.

Angela shook her head. "I grabbed something on the road. What I'd really like is a hot shower. I feel sweaty and dusty from the drive."

Elizabeth grabbed fresh towels and a washcloth from the linen closet, then turned to hand them to Angela. As Angela took them, Liz pulled Angela toward her, put a hand on her cheek, and kissed her gently. "Sometimes," Angela thought, "this relationship is like a dream, and every day we wake up and forget the dream from the day before." Of course, the problem was that they never seemed to be awake at the same time.

After Angela's shower, they ate popcorn and watched reruns of *Arrested Development* and sat close together on the couch. Angela zoned out to the television, feeling content to be near Elizabeth, their very closeness easing her sadness about Sebastian like a magnet pulling grief from her heart. While they watched TV in silence, Angela wondered about the kiss and what it might mean. Liz always did whatever she did mostly just because she wanted to, that much was evident. But to Angela, her motives were always a bit mysterious. Each time they lived these moments, these gentle kisses and tender gazings, these soft-handed touches, Angela wondered if this was the moment. Would this be the time it would take hold? Would this be the moment when it all came together in a unified course? Would this be the day when Elizabeth finally said, "Yes, this is what I want"?

When they retired to bed that night, they came closer to making love than they had in several years. But for the first time in their history, Angela actually considered the potential fallout. Their love had always included intense passion and a ferocious

physical attraction. It was heady and provided the rush of emotion and physical sensation that Angela knew she still craved, even sober, even still. But if they were to survive as a long-lasting couple, if they were to really have a chance at a real life together, Angela knew it could not be dependent on their intense physicality. She knew that people together grow old, grow out of their physical need for each other. Once out of their physical primes, sex would no longer be important to them. In light of all this, full of hope for their now-inevitable future together, Angela said, “I think maybe we shouldn’t.”

Elizabeth didn’t say anything, but Angela knew she had been caught off guard. Angela never said no to sex. Still, Liz replied, “You’re probably right.”

Despite all the things she had thought in those few seconds, what Angela *really* knew, deep inside—so deep that she dare not even consider it—was that if they didn’t make love then, it would hurt slightly less when Elizabeth withdrew from her again. She was subconsciously protecting herself.

They lay together and talked about what a “we” might look like now, at this point in their lives. They reflected on all they had been through to this night, this point in the timeline, and how uniquely suited they were for one another. They talked about the things they loved about one another and laughed about the things that drove them crazy. The last thing Angela said was, “Liz, so few people in this world ever get the opportunity to be as happy as I think you and I could be.” They settled into a comfortable embrace and fell asleep.

The next morning Angela found Liz still affectionate and emotionally present. Their tenderness was palpable, their intimacy loosed into the world finally, again. They went strolling, shopping, and eventually they stopped at a cafe for lunch. As they ate, they spoke in terms of possibilities—causes, work, homes they would enjoy, vacations they might take. One area in which Angela and Elizabeth had always differed was on the idea of children. Angela had never wanted them; Elizabeth perhaps hadn’t always wanted them so much as she thought she *should* want them. Regardless, Angela had decided long ago that she

would agree to raising children with Liz if that was what she wanted. Telling herself these stories over time, Angela convinced herself that she would grow to love the idea, that it was another side of Liz to see, another role to observe, that being a *family* and not just a couple could indeed extend their longevity when Liz inevitably grew discontent. So Angela waded tentatively into that conversation.

"I have this image of a little girl turning around in a school hallway, standing up to a bunch of bullies saying, 'Yeah, I have two moms. SO WHAT?!'"

Elizabeth giggled at this but then stopped abruptly.

"So…we're not going to play 'What should we name our kids'?" Angela asked softly after a minute of silence.

Liz just shook her head and turned away.

By the time Angela packed her bag and left to drive home the next morning, Elizabeth had returned to being a daytime firefly. The status of their relationship hung in strained ambiguity, and their goodbye embrace was awkward at best. A small, feral seed of defiance, perhaps desperation, began to grow in Angela that day. Whatever it was it lay in direct opposition to her unending devotion for Elizabeth. Angela did not even know it was there. She only knew that she began to feel called to invest in her own life, with or without the anchoring manacle of grievous love.

* * * *

Rather than hoping, wishing, or waiting for Elizabeth to make a decision about whether they were getting back together or not, Angela allowed herself to be motivated by a slowly growing aversion to this familiar pain of disappointment. The seeds of that aversion had been in the garden from the beginning, gathering strength and waiting while she pushed them farther beneath the soil under seeds of hope.

Angela sat on the floor assembling boxes and ruminating on a life unfulfilled. She had begun to suspect that perhaps Elizabeth was not her destiny after all. Or, if she was, their union would come to pass regardless of what she did or where she

went. All she knew for sure was that she was tired of her surroundings, restless for change. Her time in the Midwestern cornfields began to feel less and less like home, and she began to hear the call of her ocean muse. All her life she had longed for the ocean, and she knew she must go there permanently eventually. So she did something for herself, solely based on a faith that had been acquired and matured without her knowledge or consent; maybe this was her twelve-step program in action, maybe it was divine providence, or maybe it was just the process of finally growing comfortably into adulthood, despite the late hour. Angela had applied for a job in Florida, and they had flown her in for an interview that had gone well, so well that she believed she would actually move and leave all that had happened in this place far behind.

While she knew Liz was pursuing her PhD, Angela didn't need more education; she already had a career. She just wanted a relocation, the sooner the better. After the last infusion of sorrow brought about by Elizabeth's failure to commit to their relationship, Angela had found yet another distraction, another unavailable woman to pursue. As always, the relationship went south, but this one stood out as particularly razing and, piled onto the fallout with Elizabeth months prior, drove her to pursuing relocation.

Angela and Annie met at an AA meeting. Angela did not home in on her immediately, out of character for her. It took several encounters and phone calls for her to realize that the pattern was beginning. Then she heard herself ask a mutual friend, "Is she married?" They began to run into each other with alarming frequency. Every time they talked Angela found Annie more compelling. There was something about the way she communicated that made Angela feel simultaneously intimate yet held at a distance in a way that was difficult to describe, especially to Elizabeth. Because, of course, Angela was documenting her new relationship with Annie in phone calls with Liz. Through all of their tumultuous years, they had always shared the intimate details of their endless parade of would-be partners. For it was by the very act of each potential mate falling

short that they could remain in the bondage of their own ongoing love affair, always keeping each other at arm's length from the potential of any other consort.

Having lived life doing nothing but falling in love, Angela developed the ability to know the exact moment when the shift occurred between mild interest and dogged pursuit. With Annie, it happened during a phone call about a book. Different things are irresistible for different people, of course. For Angela, the hook had always been literature. If she loaned you a book, it meant she had offered a small piece of herself to you, a window to her soul. Unbeknownst to the loanee, she would formulate some deep-seated opinions about them based on their reaction to whatever book of hers they'd just read. Annie's loaner was Augusten Burroughs's *Magical Thinking.*

Annie said, "Well, he's funny, but I don't think that he's as funny as I think you think he is."

Angela replied, "Well, I'm also gay, so I can appreciate his humor on that level."

And Annie said, "Oh, I'm not *that* straight."

Awkward silence.

She followed up. "Well, I'm not that gay either, but I'm certainly not that straight."

Angela was dumbfounded. Had she really just said that? Did she have the slightest idea of what she'd just done? Angela posed these actual questions to her many months later, after conversations much more momentous than this one, and Annie had answered, "I knew exactly who you were, and I knew exactly what I was doing."

What made Annie so compelling for Angela was that, for the first time with anyone besides Elizabeth, she was completely at ease with being herself and being vulnerable. Unrequited love was not at all new, but the occurrence of unrequited love absent the constant feeling of rejection was entirely foreign. Annie never refused a hug, never once said, "Please don't say ____ to me," and rarely commented when Angela was engaged in her most vulnerable professions or confessions. Yes, Annie would gently set boundaries when Angela verbally crossed certain lines of

flirtation, but, overall, Angela felt very safe. This was new.

Angela and Annie's dance went on for several months, during which Angela shepherded Annie through divorce proceedings. She had no delusions about the divorce having anything at all to do with her, but she couldn't help imagining the possibilities beyond. Angela sat passively by and watched Annie dismantle her entire normal, married-complete-with-kids, country-club, well-financed life. She tried to be a good friend, tried to avoid even thinking about ways she might benefit from Annie's sorrow. But she failed. Angela's reaction would always be to push forward, not retreat. So eventually Annie went the way of all those who had come before her. And Angela went back to crying to Elizabeth. Days after the last conversation Angela would ever have with Annie, she found out that she hadn't gotten the job in Florida after all.

Chapter 15

Elizabeth's life was changing. She traveled to several universities that offered PhD programs that met her criteria. She took Angela with her on these visits via the phone in her purse, sending photos of hotel rooms and massive university stone buildings, nearby parks and cafes, recapping at the end of each visit what she liked and didn't like, her general vibe of the location, and the emotions that came with each new possibility. Perhaps because Liz was sharing so openly, or because it was so clear that she valued Angela's opinion, Angela allowed herself to be swept into Elizabeth's enthusiasm. Angela admired Liz's ability to be almost alarmingly decisive. She had decided what she wanted to do for a living and began taking action immediately, all systems go. It was easier for Angela to be Elizabeth's cheerleader when she felt like she was part of her process; that bolstered belief that they really would always be in each other's lives.

After the whirlwind university tour, Elizabeth visited Angela again, arriving in a haze of feelings over potentially losing Angela to a job in Florida or to Annie. Liz was now disinclined to take for granted that Angela would always be there. She had been shown that might indeed not be the case. Although it was true that love pulled them toward each other in their unfailing cyclical formula, both Angela and Elizabeth failed to realize the other emotion that always drove them was fear.

Within an hour of arriving, Elizabeth kissed Angela. In the moment, Angela was just a little shocked that such an action still carried such weight, that her emotional and physical reaction had been unchanged for more than ten years. Angela wondered when the exact moment was that her visceral reactions began. Was it when Elizabeth drew near to her, when she looked deep into her eyes, when her lips were an inch from her own, or when her brain registered that a kiss was about to happen? To Angela the phenomenon was one of the most beautiful things in all of creation, whatever the unnamed thing was that happened in that instant, she wished she could capture it in a bottle.

In the book that alcoholics read in the rooms of recovery, there is a passage that reads: “Our so-called will power becomes practically nonexistent. We are unable, at certain times, to bring into our consciousness with sufficient force the memory of the suffering and humiliation of even a week or a month ago.” This is not unlike the force majeure that struck Angela when Elizabeth kissed her.

They walked to a bonfire at Angela’s friend’s house a few blocks away, enjoying the crispness of fall, the smell of leaves, the feel of old and comfortable sweatshirts, both of which belonged to Angela, as Liz’s habit was to steal one for herself whenever it was anything less than seventy degrees. Angela remained present in each moment, a gift bequeathed to her from the years of never knowing how long bliss would last. The feeling that accompanied being with Liz here in Angela’s life, town, home, social circle, was markedly different from the feeling Angela had when she went to Liz’s home. It felt less precarious, more real somehow, perhaps because this was the town where their love affair began. *So different now,* Angela thought, stronger, healthier, more sustainable, more honest. In a sense she and Elizabeth had grown up together in their infinite quest for freedom and love, both together and with other lovers. And now they stood here, on Angela’s friend Julie’s porch, under the protection of the night and a cloudless, sheltering sky.

After about a half hour, seated in lawn chairs with marshmallows roasting in the fire, lively conversations all around, Angela saw Annie emerge from the back door of Julie’s house. Time froze and then a devilish grin spread across Angela’s face. This was fate. It had occurred to her that this *could* happen, since she and Annie had spent many nights at Julie’s bonfires and gatherings. But the last three or four times, she assumed Annie didn’t come any more specifically to avoid this scenario. She leaned over to Elizabeth and whispered in her ear, “Guess who that is.” Liz looked up and over, then back at Angela. She smiled and went back to having a conversation with the man seated to her right about the brilliance of some novel or another that they had both read but Angela had not. Elizabeth casually

reached over and gently laid a hand on Angela's thigh.

Angela had told Annie about her trials and tribulations with Elizabeth. She wasn't sure that Annie would put that together when she saw Angela with a woman she'd never seen before, but that didn't matter. As far as Angela knew, Annie had moved on with her life after their whole love/friendship debacle and would not have been bothered one way or another had Angela been surrounded by an extensive harem. But we all like to imagine that people who have spurned us had at least a moment where they thought they had missed out on something, that they had made the wrong decision. Angela hoped Annie was feeling that tonight.

As the night wore on, Angela noticed that whenever they were in Annie's line of vision (which was frequently, because Annie was always hyper alert to her surroundings and had a habit of scanning the crowd like a secret service agent) Elizabeth would touch Angela in some way, rub her back or give her a quick kiss. This was when Elizabeth's love shone the brightest, in these moments of protectiveness. It was as though Liz would allow no one else to wound Angela the way she herself had, a thousand times over the years. She seemed to have developed a hatred for other women that had misrepresented themselves to Angela or those who had taken advantage of her or those who had intentionally and outright led her to believe that a romantic relationship was even remotely possible.

Later, when they went back to Angela's apartment, there was a long period of kissing and caressing. When Angela said, "Do you want to…?" Elizabeth kissed her before answering. Then she said, "I think we should quit while we're ahead." So they did. They drank hot chocolate and watched TV instead, waiting for arousal to subside. They went to bed and fell asleep in their usual intertwined position. In the morning, Angela felt the familiar chill she always felt just before the spell broke. It was as reliable as the sun rising. She said a silent prayer of gratitude for having had this weekend and kissed Liz goodbye again.

Chapter 16

"Haven't you had enough yet?"

This question was posed to Angela by her friend Sarah, the same Sarah who had been with Angela on her last night of drinking and using drugs those many years ago. They had never lost touch and had been in contact more frequently lately as they pursued similar spiritual paths, discussing philosophies and beliefs, trading book recommendations, and sharing insights. Angela's spiritual life was one thing that did not connect with Elizabeth, a professed agnostic. So when Angela visited Liz the February following the bonfire at Julie's house, she also made plans to see her old friend Sarah while Elizabeth was in school during the day. Liz had decided to pursue her program where she was and explore relocation efforts later, after she'd achieved her academic dreams.

Sarah and Angela had lunch, then took a walk down by the massive lake in the outskirts of the city. As they looked out over the water in silence, Angela pondered this question. Had she had enough? Of course she had. And she had the last time and the time before that and all the times before that. Yet here she was, still embroiled. It had been so long now she could no longer remember a time when she had not been. Elizabeth was a part of her, woven into Angela's very skin. Years ago, she had surrendered to this as simply being a fact that would never change. It was the only thing she wished to take with her to the netherworld when she died. "I love her." Such a simple sentence, but it meant the whole of Angela's world. Of course, like everyone else, she had dreams, ambitions, plans. The love was the core of gravity amidst all of those peripherals, Angela simply could not figure out how to have any of the other things without that central axis.

Sarah relented. But Angela could tell she did not believe that she belonged by Liz's side. Angela did not know that Sarah was silently asking the universe to weave its magical path, to bring to Angela whatever might be in her best interest, so that she could become the person she was always meant to be.

When Angela returned to the apartment and Liz was home

from her last class, things grew uncomfortable by painstaking degrees. Angela could feel the fluttering wings of the crow as she grew more and more impatient with Liz's inability to make a decision about where they would meet friends later in the evening. Voices were raised, and their argument bled into other, much larger areas. Angela was bewildered at her own uneasiness over such a seemingly trivial detail, especially since this wasn't the first time Liz's indecision had delayed their plans. She was sure there must be something else surfacing, something dark and menacing scurrying around on the floor beneath them. They were not in their usual space, not in their usual manner; both were incredibly uncomfortable, but neither could say why. Angela was terrified, wondering if someone had posed the same question to Elizabeth. "Haven't you had enough yet?"

By the time they arrived at the bar, the vapors of their altercation had dissipated. It had apparently frightened both of them, because now Elizabeth had a finger hooked into Angela's belt loop, as if clinging to her so she didn't fly away. Perhaps whatever presence had been at the apartment was just the specter of Elizabeth's last male consort, a lingering wraith losing its power. The evening progressed without further incident, Sarah seeming to set aside her prejudice, Liz's friends teasing Angela about being the mystery lover they'd heard about but didn't quite believe existed until now. There was no mention of the man who'd likely stood before them in the same spot just a few weeks before.

A very intoxicated, very flamboyant young man flew across the room and flung his arms around Elizabeth. She appeared not to know him. He said, with heartbreaking earnestness, "I'm sorry. I just had to hug you. You are *so* beautiful." Angela was unaware that this display of gay male diva worship could happen to women who weren't celebrities. What the man did next, though, threw everyone. He turned to Angela, who Liz was still holding onto by her belt loop, and said, "Oh, you're beautiful, too," as if in apology, like it was rude to compliment one woman without also lavishing praise on the woman she was with, no matter how insincere it sounded. Then he stumbled away. Angela knew that she was attractive, but she was not beautiful.

Chapter 17

When Angela kissed Liz goodbye and left for home the next day, she was overcome with fatigue. Driving home, her only persistent thought was *I am so very tired.* The feeling grew over the next several days, then weeks. Angela began to think she might be ill, so she saw her primary care physician, who found nothing physically wrong with her. She told her therapist the only feeling she could identify was *empty,* that each day felt like a rerun of the previous day, going through the motions of work-home-dinner-bed. She kept declining invitations from friends to go out, and she had begun cutting her phone conversations with Liz short. This depression went on for about a month. On the last day of that month, Angela walked outside to leave for work and stopped dead in her tracks. An enormous black crow was sitting on the hood of her car. It didn't look like the small crow that terrorized her when she was in that half-awake, half-asleep twilight. This was a corporeal large dark bird, anyone could see it. The crow saw her and spread its wings, held her gaze for no more than a half second, and flew away. Angela watched it fly until she couldn't see it anymore.

* * * *

Angela didn't know how many times Elizabeth's lips touched hers, but she could remember the first like it was yesterday. She would always remember the last time, too.

Liz wasn't coming to town to see Angela anymore; she was coming for a conference and this time had asked to see Angela while she was there. Angela actually couldn't believe Liz still wanted to see her and spend time with her after their conversation prior to the visit. Angela's frustration was no longer subtle; she had been an outright bitch. Said things like, "Well, if you can pencil me into your busy schedule," and, "If I get to see you that's cool, but if not whatever." She had offered to let Liz stay at her place, knowing full well that she would not, knowing that whoever Liz *did* stay with, she was likely to have sex with,

even if she had no intention of doing so initially.

Elizabeth arrived at Angela's house and gave her a hug that said, "I'm doing this because I know you expect me to, but truthfully, I'm extremely uncomfortable and wish I didn't have to." They practically repelled each other now, as though their polarity had suddenly reversed. Things had changed drastically since the last time they were together, since Angela came out of the fog of her depression, since the incident with the real crow. Angela came to understand that the crow was hope, and hope had departed.

They went to lunch at a specialty pizza place where you could get a pizza with virtually any topping. Liz wanted pizza with salmon, which Angela had zero interest in but still agreed to for their lunch choice. In their most recent phone conversation, Liz had told Angela her philosophy of her complicated sex life. This was seemingly separate from her relationship life, from which she was on hiatus. Again.

"It's like I have little satellites that sort of orbit around my life. Some on the east coast, some on the west coast, some in my hometown, some here in this town. Yeah, it's 'a girl in every port' kind of thing, I know. What I realize is that if I'm ever in a seriously committed relationship, I would miss my satellites."

Angela brought this up while she picked at her pizza. She wanted to volunteer to be a satellite (as though she had a choice in the matter), as she didn't think there were any other women in the list, begrudgingly believing that a partial sexual relationship with Elizabeth was better than none at all. Besides, as the only woman, she would still be a different kind of satellite, not like all the others.

Instead of indulging Angela, Liz said, "Well, there aren't any women satellites, but that's kind of what I wanted to talk to you about."

Angela knew that Liz didn't mean she was considering Angela's offer. And she really didn't want to know what Liz was going to say next.

"Remember Jenn?"

Of course Angela remembered Jenn. The Jenn whom Liz had dated once when they had not been in contact for several months. The Jenn who she complained to Angela about long after the fact. Jenn, who fell head over heels for Liz in the same fashion

other lesbians had: hard, fast, and desperately. Jenn whom she got high with and didn't really enjoy spending time with, and, as Angela recalled, even had an aversion response when Jenn tried to snuggle with her the nights they were together. Angela had forgiven her for Jenn because it happened when they were not in contact and because it was over as far as she knew. Angela knew there were other women that Liz hadn't told her about, but Jenn, for some reason, had been worthy of discussion.

"So after this party it just kind of happened, and it was…well, it was really good. I guess we're sort of seeing each other."

Translation: We just fell into bed together and for reasons that have apparently beamed in from some other planet, I decided to try a relationship with her again. Isn't that neat?

All Angela could manage was, "So…what? Is it serious?"

"I'm not sure what it is. We'll see."

Angela had spent a great number of years learning how to brace herself for Elizabeth's attempts at real relationships with men. Part of Angela's coping skills were to remind herself of who and what Liz was, knowing that no matter how pure the intent, she would eventually self-sabotage, run, or find some other way to end what might very well have been a good thing. But the women had been few and far between, so Angela believed she was the only one who had ever really mattered. That belief had kept her in the relationship for all this time. Angela was special, chosen, irreplaceable.

Now something inside Angela that had been willing to bend instantly became brittle and finally broke. Angela knew this feeling, of course, but this time was different. She didn't yet understand that somewhere within the depths of her soul, there was a sentinel who had had enough. The one and only thing that Angela couldn't possibly bear from Liz had come to pass. She had been waiting for nearly a decade.

Angela would not recall much of the conversation after that. The splintering and eventual shattering of her own world into shards was too loud. She burst into tears, telling Liz that up until then she still had hope, she would have married her, she was the great love of her life. Angela had said all these things before but

not with such finality. Elizabeth told Angela that she was going to take a walk on campus before driving back home and asked if she wanted to go with her, to continue this conversation.

For perhaps the first time ever, Angela said no.

She managed to pull it together enough to leave the pizza place, get in the car, and drive back to her apartment. There was some discussion about how Liz was no longer attracted to Angela physically, not even a little. That information did not compute with the events of less than three months previous, mere weeks if you really thought about it. Angela's response was that of a self-conscious teenager. Her adult self checked out entirely on the drive home. She could only hear the crow:

"You're weak, she needs someone strong. You're afraid, she needs someone fearless.

You are not good enough for her. You are not pretty enough, thin enough, smart enough.

She does not love you. She never loved you."

In the parking lot of Angela's building, there were the stale pleasantries: "talk soon" and "have a good day" and "drive safe." Why they bothered to say anything at all is a mystery. Angela looked into Elizabeth's eyes for the last time, and there was nothing, not even a hint of, remorse or compassion. Maybe Elizabeth was just hiding those things, but Angela would never know.

In that last impulsive instant, Angela leaned in and kissed her. At first her lips were met with not resistance but a complete lack of response, like kissing a pillow. After a few seconds, Angela felt Elizabeth give in to that kiss ever so slightly, one last surge of all that they had been through, all those waves of love that crashed ashore and then receded into the vast ocean. And then it was over. There was nothing left to do or say. Angela didn't even watch Liz get into her car and drive away. She just ran inside to the warmth of her own things, her creature comforts. And she wept. For days, weeks, months. But no matter how great the pain became, Angela did something she had never done before, or, rather, did not do something. She didn't call. She didn't text. She didn't write. And, painfully slowly, weeks turned into months and months turned into years.

Afterword

I have no regrets.

Ours was the relationship of a lifetime, perhaps of many lifetimes. Carl Jung once said, “The meeting of two personalities is like the contact of two chemical substances: if there is any reaction, both are transformed.” I believe that happened with us; we were transformed by our shared experience. I cannot speak to your metamorphosis, of course.

I can tell you that I learned about simultaneous truths; because one thing is true does not necessarily mean that another thing is not true. I truly was addicted to you. But that does not mean that I didn’t genuinely love you in the purest sense of the word. Both things were and are true, my truth.

Over the course of many years and a number of counselors and therapists and AA sponsors, I also came to understand the nature of my most deeply held fractured core beliefs and how those beliefs contributed—and, at times, still contribute—to patterns of relationships and behaviors and choices.

I became versed in love, that elusive, ill-defined, ever-present life force. I began to learn about what it really means to care about someone unconditionally despite the fact that I was never able to achieve that with you, though I tried: for years I tried.

I learned how to love honestly and with abandon, holding nothing back and risking my heart and all it holds. I became skilled at being myself in relation to another, and being truthful about who I am, and who I strive to become, even at the risk of losing someone.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, I learned how to let go.

THE END

ABOUT ANGELA C. KELLY

Angela C. Kelly has been writing since she was tall enough to hit the keys on a manual typewriter. Two of her poems, “Religion” and “Redemption,” have been published. “Religion” won the Iliad Press Grand Prize Literary Award in the winter of 2003. Other works have appeared in a variety of independent magazines, newsletters, and websites. *Unavailable*, her novel-length memoir, and her second book, the fictional *Second Best Fantasy*, were published by JMS Books in 2011.

Angela lives, breathes, and consumes books. She was employed in the publishing production industry for over a decade and has a bachelor’s degree in English from the University of Illinois. Later, she returned to the U and earned a master’s degree in Library and Information Science. She spends much of her time haunting libraries and local bookstores, always in search of the next piece of inspiring and overwhelming literature to add to her reading repertoire.

In her years of pre-teen angst, Angela spent much of her time writing what she now refers to as her “Die, Love, Die!” poetry. Influenced by the iconic bodies of work of Virginia Woolf and Sylvia Plath, the melancholy bled through all of her early writing, as she struggled to find a sense of self in an earlier, anti-LGBTQ era. Eventually her poetic works evolved into a richer, more diverse style.

Today, Angela devours the works of many writers across genres. Her wife was a close friend of the late David Foster Wallace, and several signed paperbacks of his work grace their bookshelves. She is also a devotee of perhaps the most prolific contemporary author alive: Joyce Carol Oates.

Angela currently lives and works thirty miles north of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, with her wife Cindy and their furry four-legged children. She has, on more than one occasion, vowed to one day write her complete memoirs with only a sharp shell in the sand, to be carried away on the memory of the ocean’s waves.

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